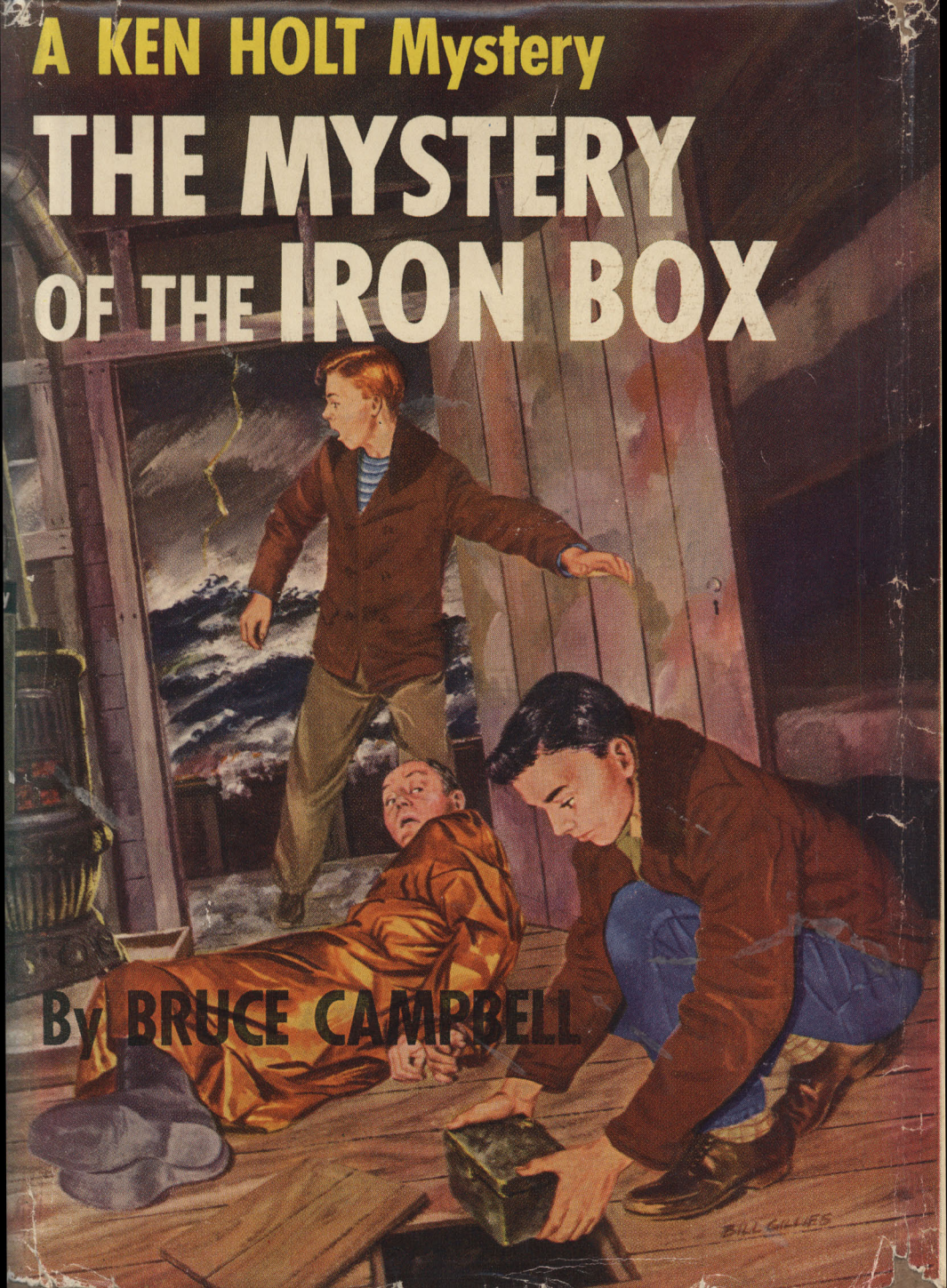
A KEN HOLT Mystery

THE MYSTERY OF THE IRON BOX



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THE MYSTERY OF THE IRON BOX

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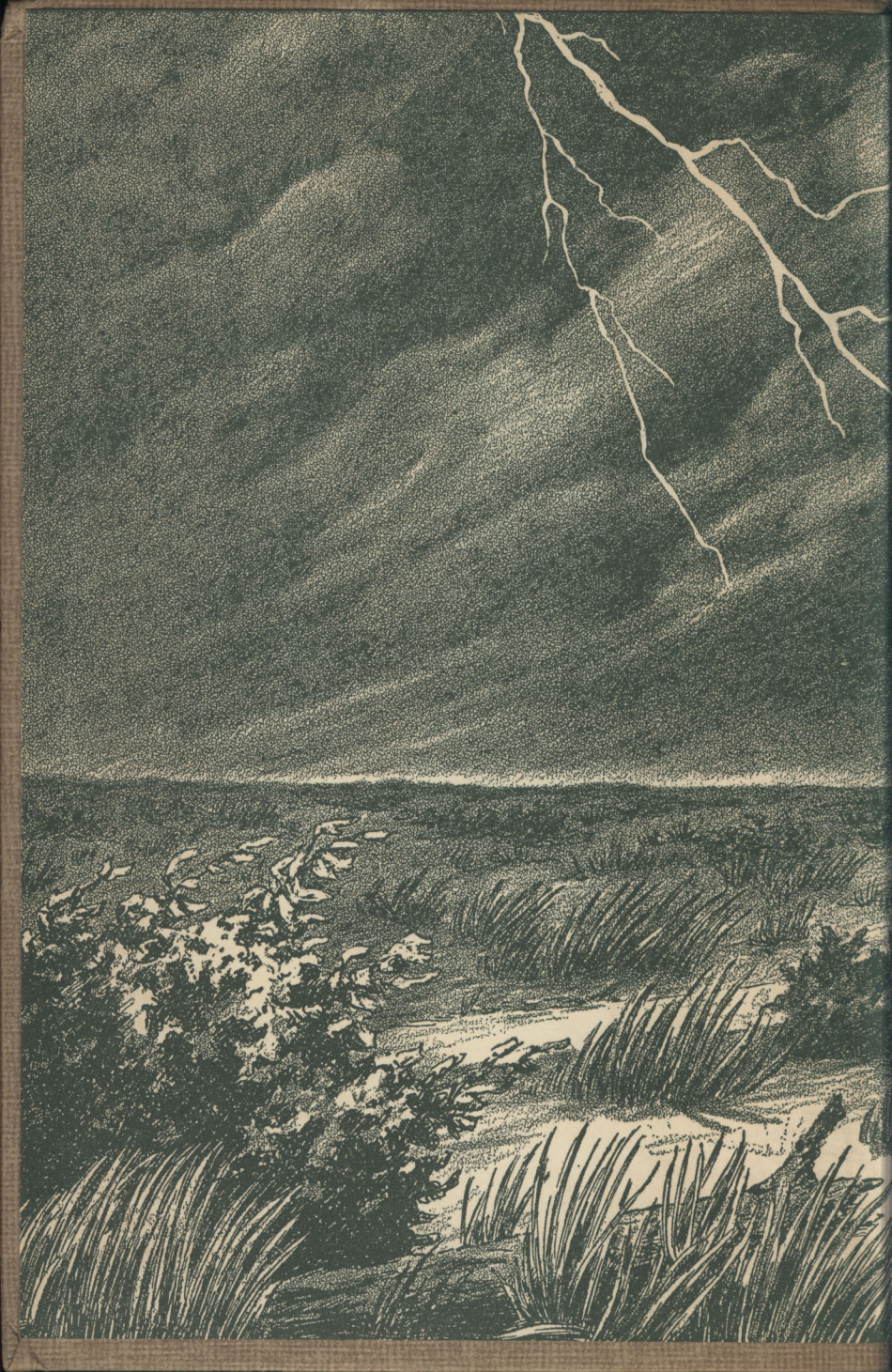

THE MYSTERY OF THE IRON BOX

KEN HOLT *Mystery Stories*

THE SECRET OF SKELETON ISLAND

THE RIDDLE OF THE STONE ELEPHANT

THE BLACK THUMB MYSTERY

THE CLUE OF THE MARKED CLAW

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

THE SECRET OF HANGMAN'S INN

THE MYSTERY OF THE IRON BOX

Ken stifled a gasp. All over the table lay crisp counterfeit ten-dollar bills

A KEN HOLT Mystery

THE MYSTERY OF THE IRON BOX

By Bruce Campbell

GROSSET & DUNLAP *Publishers*

NEW YORK

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THE MYSTERY OF THE IRON BOX

CHAPTER I

A COLD DRAFT

THE LOUD-SPEAKER'S BELLOW died away and there was an answering stir in the big terminal building of the airport. People began to move toward the wide windows that overlooked the landing field. Soon there was a thick wall of humanity packed against the rail that protected the glass.

"Too jammed up here. Let's go outside." The young man who spoke was slender and slightly more than medium height. Over a neat gray flannel suit he wore a tan trench coat which hung well from broad shoulders. His black hair looked even blacker than usual in the brilliant glare of the well-lighted room.

His companion towered over him by almost half a foot. A trench coat, also tan, dropped from massive shoulders that hinted of tremendous power. He lifted his left hand to look at his wrist watch. "On time," he said. Then, using his shoulders as a wedge, he gently forced a path to the doors. His flaming red hair stood out above the crowd like a beacon.

Outside, in the crisp December afternoon, the air

was filled with the heavy throb of plane motors. Overhead, a silver ship was wheeling into the wind, landing gear down.

The loud-speaker came to life again. "Flight two-oh-six, from Paris," it intoned, "now landing."

Sandy Allen, the huge redhead, touched his friend's arm. "Feels good to have him coming home for Christmas, huh?"

Ken Holt grinned briefly, his eyes steadily riveted on the plane now zooming toward them down the paved strip. "And how!"

"If I had any sense," Sandy said, "I'd fade out on an occasion like this. It isn't often that you and your father—"

"If you had any sense," Ken interrupted, "you'd remember that if it weren't for the oversized Allen clan I might not even—"

The deafening roar of engines cut off the rest of his sentence, but Sandy's face had already begun to redden. He could take almost anything except gratitude, and he hated to be reminded of the circumstances in which he and Ken had first met. Ken's father had been in desperate danger then, and the entire Allen family—Pop, Bert, Sandy, and Mom—had taken part in the frightening hours of action that followed their meeting.

Afterward, Ken Holt, motherless for years, had left his boarding school at the Allens' insistence to make his home with them. Mom Allen treated him like another son, and Pop Allen had given Ken a part in the operation of the Allen-owned newspaper, the Brentwood *Advance*.

Ken and Sandy had shared many adventures since

then; had encountered many exciting and dangerous puzzles which they had solved together. They worked as a team, both in unraveling mysteries and in reporting them afterward. Ken's stories and Sandy's photographs had been eagerly accepted not only by the *Advance,* but also by Global News, the gigantic news-gathering agency for which Ken's father, Richard Holt, worked.

Ken glanced up at Sandy's flushed face. "Relax, chum," he said. "I won't say another word about how much I owe—"

Sandy clamped his huge hand over Ken's mouth. "I'll say you won't." He grinned. "In return for your silence —something we rarely get from you," he went on, "I'll let you in on a secret." He removed his hand and reached into his pocket.

"What secret?" Ken asked suspiciously.

"You remember that last little mess we got into— the one Pop called *The Secret of Hangman's Inn?*"

"I'd just as soon not remember that," Ken said.

"Have it your own way." Sandy had pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. "In that case you won't want your half of this check from Global for the yarn and the pictures we sent them."

Ken grabbed for the check and looked at it. "What do you know!" he murmured. "A hundred and fifty dollars! Granger must be getting soft in the head."

"Granger," Sandy said loftily, "is a top-flight news editor. He appreciates the remarkable quality of my pictures. He'd probably make it two hundred if he didn't have to wade through that stuff you call writing."

Ken handed the check back to Sandy. "Pictures," he

said, "are something anybody can take. But writing—real writing—" Suddenly he broke off. "There's Dad!"

Richard Holt had just stepped out of the plane, first in the line of passengers descending the stairway. He was a slender figure in a rumpled topcoat, with a brief case clamped under one arm. The other arm raised in a swift salute as he spotted them.

"Hi!" he shouted.

"Dad!" Ken's answering shout carried far across the field. His father spent most of his time in distant quarters of the globe, ferreting out the stories that had made him famous. His visits home, brief and infrequent, were always exciting. The Allens enjoyed them as much as Ken himself did, and this year they were all particularly pleased at the thought of having Richard Holt at hand over the holidays.

"We'll meet you outside the customs office," Ken called, as his father drew nearer.

Richard Holt nodded, smiling.

"Come on!" Ken said to Sandy, and they turned back through the crowd. "It won't take him long to clear customs. They know him by now."

Twenty minutes later Richard Holt came through the barrier to where they were waiting for him. He dropped two bags and his brief case and threw an arm around each of the boys. Then he stood back a pace to look them over.

"Are you two as good as you look?" he demanded, grinning widely.

"We're even better," Sandy assured him, scooping up both the bags. "You look O.K. too."

"You look great, Dad," Ken said.

"I am. And glad to be home too."

"This is our first Christmas together in three years." Ken groped for the brief case, but his eyes never left his father's face.

"We'll make it a good one, son."

Sandy began to lead the way to the parking lot. "If food will help," he said, "I think you can count on Mom. Wait until you see the turkey she's got!"

"With cranberry sauce?" Richard Holt asked.

Sandy nodded. "Also with dressing, sweet potatoes, plum pudding—"

"Stop!" Ken's father commanded. "Let us waste no more time talking. On to Brentwood! That is," he corrected himself, as he came to a halt beside the boys' red convertible, "on to Brentwood after a quick stop at my apartment. I want to get rid of some of this luggage and change my clothes. I'll sit in the back seat with the bags, if you don't mind," he went on, "so I can be sorting out the things I want to take with me. It'll save time."

Sandy started the motor and the car slid smoothly into the line of traffic heading for New York City. Forty-five minutes later he pulled to a stop before the building in which Ken's father maintained his seldom-used apartment.

"Give me five minutes," Richard Holt said.

"Shall I carry your bags up, Dad?" Ken asked.

"I've got them." The correspondent swung one in each hand. "They're considerably lighter than they were." He nodded toward a heap of packages on the back seat. "Don't go snooping in those things while I'm gone."

"Word of honor," Ken said, grinning.

Richard Holt was back at the car again in six minutes flat. "O.K., men," he said, sliding into the front seat beside Ken. "Head for Brentwood—and don't spare the horsepower."

"Aye, aye, sir." Sandy let the car move forward. A moment later he was heading southward toward the Holland Tunnel and New Jersey across the Hudson River.

"Now," Mr. Holt said, settling himself comfortably, "you can begin to tell me what Mom's preparing for tonight. After all, the Christmas turkey is still two days away. She doesn't expect me to fast until then, I hope."

"Not quite," Sandy assured him. "For tonight she's got—"

Several hours later Richard Holt shoved his chair back from the Allen dinner table and sighed luxuriously. "Sandy didn't exaggerate a bit," he assured Mom Allen. "My only worry now is recovering my appetite in time for the turkey."

Mom's eyes twinkled at him. "One good way of working off a meal is to wash the dishes, Richard."

"Now, Mom," Pop protested. "Dick's a guest."

"I always think of him as a member of the family," Mom said.

"Thank you, Mom," Richard Holt said. "It's an honor —even if it does make me eligible for dishwashing."

Mom stood up. "Then that's settled. I'll just leave everything in your capable masculine hands, while I run down the street to visit with my sister for a while."

Bert grinned. "That's where Mom's hoarding her

presents," he explained to Richard Holt. "She doesn't trust us."

"I have my reasons," Mom assured him as she departed.

Sandy washed, Ken dried, and Bert stacked the dishes in their places in the cupboard. Pop and Ken's father stood on the side lines to give what Pop called their "invaluable advice." Within half an hour the job was done.

As Ken flipped his dish towel over the rack, he said, "Do you want some paper and ribbon and stuff for wrapping up those packages you brought, Dad? We've got plenty."

"Fine," his father said. "I was just thinking they didn't look very festive in the old newspapers I've got wadded around them."

Pop took his pipe out of his mouth. "You know, Dick, we Allens follow the custom of opening presents on Christmas Eve. Hope this isn't opposed to your own tradition."

"It suits me fine." Mr. Holt smiled. "Means we can sleep later on Christmas morning—and work up more strength for the turkey."

Ken brought out the cardboard box of wrappings he had found in a closet. "Want me to bring the packages down from your room, Dad?" he asked, with a great show of innocence.

"Not on your life," his father told him. "You can just wait until tomorrow night to see what's in them." He started for the stairs himself.

"I'll give you a hand," Bert offered, when Richard Holt had returned with the packages.

"Don't let him," Sandy advised. "It's a trick. He just wants to poke around."

The foreign correspondent grinned. "I need help, all right. I'm no good at this." He picked up the largest of the various bundles. "But this one is yours, Bert, so don't touch it."

"I'll wrap that one," Pop offered.

"Thanks." Mr. Holt hefted two parcels of almost equal size, and finally handed one to Sandy. "That's Pop's—and don't drop it." He handed the other to Bert. "That's Sandy's—and that had better not be dropped either."

Ken eyed the two packages still on the table. "Which is Mom's? I'll do hers."

"Let that wait for last," his father said. "I want a conference on it. In the meantime—" He took up the smaller of the two remaining parcels and set to work on it himself.

When they were all finished, Richard Holt began to tear the heavy newspaper wrapping from the final parcel. "Take a look at this, will you?" he asked. "If you don't think Mom will like it, I'll get her something else tomorrow. I don't feel very satisfied with it myself."

The last sheet of paper fell away to disclose a small iron box, about eight inches long, four inches wide, and four inches deep. The surface was heavily ornamented with scrollwork, and its considerable weight was evident from the way Ken's father held it.

"I thought," he said half-apologetically, "that she could line it with velvet or something and use it for a jewel box. But I don't know much about such things.

Maybe you can suggest something else she'd rather have."

"She'll love it," Pop said decisively. "She loves old things—antiques. And this sure looks old."

"I think it's old enough," Richard Holt said. "Several hundred years, I'd guess. It was probably made originally to be used as a sort of home safe-deposit box." His finger pressed one of the curlicues on the front of the box and the lid sprang open.

"Hey!" Sandy exclaimed admiringly. "A secret catch!"

"May I try it?" Bert asked. "Beautiful workmanship," he muttered, as his fingers explored the front. Finally he found the proper curlicue and again the lid flew open.

Sandy tried it next, and then Pop and then Ken.

"No doubt about it," Sandy said finally. "Mom'll be crazy about it. She likes secrets as much as she likes antiques."

Ken, about to hand the box back to his father, saw that Richard Holt's hands were occupied with lighting a cigarette. So he put the box, instead, on the platform of Mrs. Allen's kitchen scale, near at hand on the shelf. The indicator of the scale swung sharply over.

"Look," Sandy said. "Four and a half pounds even. It weighs a lot for such a little thing."

"They didn't skimp on materials in those days," Pop said. "Where'd you get hold of it, Dick?"

"One of the porters in the Global office in Rome asked me if I wanted to buy it," the foreign correspondent answered. "I knew he'd been selling some of his

family heirlooms—he has a hard time getting along—and I wanted to help him out. I persuaded myself at the time that it would do for Mom's present, but later I had some qualms about it. I thought maybe I should have shopped around, instead of just taking something that fell into my hands. But if you think it's all right—"

He cleared a space on the kitchen table, spread out a sheet of wrapping paper, and reached for the box. As he picked it up, it slipped from his fingers, struck the edge of the cupboard a glancing blow, and crashed to the floor. The lid sprang open.

Sandy and Ken both dived for it as Richard Holt muttered, "That was stupid of me."

"It can't be hurt," Pop said. "It's made too solidly."

Mr. Holt pressed the lid into place, but when he took his hand away it opened again. He tried a second time. Once more the lid refused to stay closed.

Five heads bent over to study the tiny mechanism.

Bert touched the little spring catch. "That's what's wrong," he said. "The little lever is bent out of shape."

"Maybe I can fix it," Sandy offered.

"Better not try," Pop cautioned. "An expensive antique like that—"

"It wasn't expensive, I assure you," Richard Holt said. "It—"

"Never mind," Pop said. "It's an antique and I don't think anybody but Sam Morris ought to touch it. He's the best jeweler in town. He can fix anything."

Sandy offered to telephone Morris to see if he could take care of the job that evening. When he returned from the hall he reported that the jeweler was just then closing his shop, but that he had promised to repair the

box the next day despite the rush of orders that always claimed his attention on Christmas Eve.

"So let's just get it out of sight before Mom comes home," Pop said. "Then you boys can take it down to him first thing in the morning."

"How's this?" Bert asked, dumping an assortment of Christmas seals out of a shoe box. "You can put it in here."

When the little box was inside, he snapped a rubber band around the cardboard container and scrawled on the cover "Mom—Don't peek!"

"And we'll leave it right here," Bert said, placing it in full sight on the sideboard.

"What's the idea?" Richard Holt wanted to know.

Pop grinned. "Just teasing her."

"She'll try to wheedle a hint out of us—without ever asking a direct question," Bert said.

"But she won't look inside," Sandy added.

"Sounds like some form of torture to me," Ken's father said.

"It is," Sandy admitted, grinning. "But it's an old Allen custom—only usually we're on the receiving end."

But Mom, when she returned a little later, refused to give them the satisfaction of a single question. She did walk past the sideboard several times, but they could never catch her looking directly at the box. And once, when she had to move it aside to make room for her morning's setting of rolls, she seemed not even to notice that the shoe box was a stranger in her kitchen.

Richard Holt grinned at the Allens, and they grinned sheepishly back at him. "If there's any teasing going

on around here," he said quietly, "I don't think we're doing it."

"Did I hear you say you wanted a cheese sandwich?" Mom said. Her eyes were twinkling.

"Eh—why, yes, I believe I could manage one—even after all that dinner," Richard Holt admitted.

Some time later, as Sandy crawled into bed and snapped off the light at his elbow, he murmured his usual last request to Ken. "Don't forget to open the window."

Ken slid the frame up several inches and shivered as the cold air struck him. "It's snowing," he said.

There was no answer. Sandy was already asleep.

But Ken was still wide awake ten minutes later. He turned over and tried counting sheep, but the ruse didn't work.

"Serves me right," he muttered, "for eating that cheese sandwich." He turned over once more.

When another ten minutes had gone by he slid out from under the covers.

"A good dull book—that's what I need," Ken decided. "And Pop's got plenty of them in his library downstairs."

In his robe and slippers he cautiously opened the bedroom door and stepped out into the silent hallway. As he moved toward the stairway he slid one hand along the wall to feel for the hall-light switch.

Suddenly he stopped. A cold draft was swirling around his feet. He was just deciding that he hadn't pulled the bedroom door tight shut when something else caught his attention. Below him, in the darkness, a faint click sounded.

And almost immediately the draft around his feet died away.

Ken's hand moved swiftly then. His fingers found the switch and the hall light snapped on. Ken took the two descending steps to the turn in a single quiet leap. But before he could start down the rest of the flight he heard another click from downstairs, and felt another surge of cold air around his feet. A third mysterious click sounded just as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

Ken snapped on all three switches on the wall of the lower hallway. The hallway itself, the living room, and the sun porch all became brightly illuminated.

But the light revealed nothing to his searching eyes. The rooms looked just as they had looked some time before, when the Allens and Holts had gone upstairs to bed. He went through the dining room, into the kitchen, and into the pantry, turning on all the lights as he went. But nowhere was there any sign of disturbance, or of an intruder who might have been responsible for those clicking sounds.

Ken shook his head. "Was I dreaming? I certainly thought I heard something down here. And it sounded like the front door opening and closing."

Finally he turned off all the lights, picked up his book, and started back toward the stairs. But at the foot of them he stopped. That cold draft around his feet couldn't have been a dream.

Ken moved swiftly to the front door. It was securely locked. He started for the kitchen door and then turned back.

He snapped on the front entrance light and pulled

the curtain away from the glass panel in the door in order to peer out.

His breath caught sharply. Footprints stood out clearly on the snow-covered porch. And through the veil of falling snow, for as far as the light penetrated, he could see further footprints—on the porch steps and on the flagstone walk that crossed the lawn to the sidewalk.

CHAPTER II

A FIRE

THERE WAS A DOUBLE LINE of the footprints—one set coming toward the door, one set going away from it. Ken stared at them for a long moment.

Suddenly he realized that he was clearly visible, through the glass, to anyone who might be outside the house. Quickly he dropped the curtain into place and with a swift gesture he fastened the safety chain above the lock on the door.

Then he ran to the back door and fastened the safety chain there.

The events of the past few moments were perfectly clear in his mind. He sat on the edge of the kitchen table and ran over them again, trying to explain them to himself as he went along.

He had stepped out of his bedroom and had almost immediately felt the draft of cold air. Probably the front door was just then being opened. The faint click he had heard an instant later had probably been the door being eased shut again—because after the click he had no longer felt the draft.

The intruder—and there must have been one, Ken concluded—had actually been inside the house. Because there had been two other clicks, and another draft of cold air, which must have occurred as the intruder opened the closed door again in order to escape into the darkness.

Ken was out of the kitchen in a flash, and on his knees before the front door. His fingers explored the surface of the polished floor. A few feet inside the threshold there were two patches of dampness.

Ken moved backward carefully, surveying every inch of the smooth surface. He found no further wet spots. It seemed clear that the intruder had taken one step into the hall and then retreated again, apparently frightened off by Ken's own footsteps in the upper hall.

Ken made one more round of the house, and again assured himself that nothing had been taken or disturbed. His impulse to wake Sandy, and tell him about the whole business, died slowly away. There seemed no point in arousing Sandy, or anybody else, in the middle of the night.

Ken warmed a glass of milk for himself in the kitchen and drank it thoughtfully. Then he went back upstairs, with a book under his arm. But he didn't turn on his small reading light. He lay on his back, staring up into the darkness and puzzling over the mysterious intruder, until he finally fell into a troubled sleep.

When he woke up, the clock said only seven-thirty, but he got out of bed immediately. The snow had stopped. The world outside was blanketed with white. It was dazzling to Ken's eyes, even at that early hour of a winter morning.

Sandy opened one sleepy eye as Ken stripped off his pajamas and began to dress. "Where do you think you're going at this time of night?"

"Downstairs," Ken said. "And it's morning. You'd better get up too. I've got something to tell you."

Sandy closed his eye again. "Can't you tell me here?"

"We'd wake everybody else up." Ken tied his last shoelace. "Come on. It's important."

The seriousness in his voice brought Sandy to a sitting position. "O.K. Get some coffee going. I'll be down before it's ready."

Ten minutes later, while the coffee percolator bubbled away unnoticed, Ken completed his story.

"Well," he said after a moment, "what do you think? Were we almost burglarized—or weren't we?"

Sandy set his empty orange-juice glass on the table. He was grinning widely. "I think," he said, "you were asleep last night half a minute after I was. The whole thing was a dream. You should give up cheese sandwiches."

Ken pointed to the rear door. "I didn't dream the chain into place there. Or on the front door, either."

Sandy shrugged. "Maybe you walked in your sleep." But he got to his feet. "All right. Let's go see these alleged footsteps on the front porch."

They walked through the hall together. Sandy unfastened the chain, unlocked the door, and threw it wide open. The white sweep of snow over the porch was unmarked.

"I could have told you they wouldn't show any more," Ken pointed out. "It was still snowing then. Naturally they got covered up."

Sandy was still smiling as he bent down to examine the outer face of the lock. When he straightened again he looked sober.

"Take a look," he said quietly. "Those little scratches on the face plate were never made by keys. I'd say somebody's been using a picklock in the dark."

"I'd say it's a good thing I *did* eat cheese sandwiches," Ken said a moment later, as they closed the door. "If I hadn't come downstairs the house might have been cleaned out. Do you think we ought to notify the police?" he asked, when they were back in the kitchen and Sandy was pouring out two cups of coffee.

"Let's let Pop decide," Sandy suggested. "And let's not worry Mom about it as long as nothing was taken and no harm seems to have been done."

"Right," Ken agreed. "We can talk to Pop at the office."

They ate some toast, drank their coffee, and then went outside to clear the walks and the driveway. By the time they had finished shoveling the snow it was almost nine o'clock and they were ready for some of the bacon and eggs Mom was preparing for Pop and Bert and Richard Holt and herself.

The phone rang while they were all at the table.

Bert went to answer it. "Global News wants Richard Holt," he called from the hall.

Holt shoved his chair back with an impatient gesture. "I called the office from the apartment yesterday, just to let them know I was back," he said. "I see now that was a mistake. If they've thought up an assignment that will cut me out of a turkey dinner—" He disappeared into the hall.

When he came back he was smiling. "Nothing serious," he reported quickly, answering the question in Ken's eyes. "I'm still on vacation. Global just wanted to let me know I didn't close the apartment door carefully when I dashed in and out yesterday."

"Global told you that?" Pop looked blank.

The correspondent grinned over a fresh cup of coffee. "I know it sounds confusing. Seems the apartment-house janitor found my door ajar when he was cleaning the hall this morning. He didn't know I was back in the country, so he called Global News to ask what to do about it. Granger sent a man down to look the place over—very kind of him, of course, as he was careful to remind me. But nothing was disturbed—clothes, portable radio, typewriter, all safe and sound. No signs of illegal entry, so apparently the fault was mine."

He grinned again. "Granger wouldn't even have called me about it, except that it gave him a chance to explain that Global always has the best interests of their employees at heart."

The others grinned back at him, all but Ken and Sandy who looked soberly at each other over the table. The same thought was in both their minds. An attempted burglary in Brentwood and a mysteriously unlocked door in Holt's New York apartment, both on the same night, seemed a remarkable coincidence. Sandy opened his mouth to speak.

But Ken, shaking his head slightly, got to his feet. "Are we all vacationing today?" he asked. "Or are we going down to the office?"

"I hope you're not all planning to vacation under my feet," Mom said frankly. "I've got a lot to do today."

"We can take a hint," Pop replied with dignity. "Come on, Holt. There's not much work on tap for today, but we can yarn at the office as comfortably as we can here. You two," he added to Sandy and Ken, "have to take you-know-what to you-know-where."

"I hope you're referring to that disreputable-looking shoe box on the sideboard," Mom said. "I'd like to have somebody take it somewhere out of my way."

"Know what's in it, Mom?" Bert asked.

"No. And I haven't the slightest curiosity," Mom told her older son.

"Not much, you haven't!" Bert said. "I'll bet you spent half an hour this morning trying to see through the cardboard."

"I have other things to do with my time, especially on a busy day like this," Mom assured him. "For example, there are the dishes to be done. But of course if you're all going to be here, you might—"

Pop was on his feet. "We're on our way, ma'am. On our way. Come on, Holt, you drive down with Bert and me."

Ken and Sandy took the shoe box with them when they left a few minutes later, but they didn't go directly to Sam Morris's shop. They went to the office first.

"We think you ought to know about something that happened last night, Pop," Sandy said abruptly, when he and Ken joined the others in the Brentwood *Advance* office. "Ken came downstairs in the middle of the night and—"

"No!" Bert leaped to his feet with an expression of mock horror. "You mean he found Mom peeping in the box?"

Sandy didn't even laugh. "Tell them, Ken."

Ken made his report as brief as possible. "You can see the scratches on the lock yourselves," he concluded, "when we go back to the house." He turned to his father. "And if somebody also broke into your apartment last night, Dad, it certainly looks—"

Bert's laugh interrupted him. "It's not enough for you two to imagine one burglar. Oh, no—you can do better than that."

"Nobody tried to burglarize my apartment, Ken," Holt said. "I just didn't lock it properly myself."

"How do you know?" Ken asked. "Can you be sure, Dad?"

"Doesn't it seem strange," Sandy put in, "that the minute you land in the country somebody breaks into the house where you're staying, and at the same time your own apartment is mysteriously—"

Bert was still laughing. "You're just not used to the way these two carry on," he told Ken's father. "Every time they see a doughnut they begin to worry about who stole the middle out of it. Anything for a mystery —that's their philosophy."

"Now wait a minute," Pop said mildly. "It does sound as if there might be a sneak thief around Brentwood. We don't have them often, but I suppose Christmas is a likely time, with everybody's house full of presents. I'll call Andy Kane and tell him to alert the force. That satisfy you?" He looked at Ken and Sandy. "But I will *not*," he added, "call the New York police chief with a similar suggestion. So you two just take your dark suspicions out of here, and get over to Sam Morris's while he's still got time to fix that catch."

Ken and Sandy looked at each other. Ken smiled first.

"All right," he said. "I guess that does make sense. Come on, Sandy. But save your best stories until we get back, Dad."

As soon as they arrived at the jeweler's shop they were glad they had waited no longer. The place was crowded with customers, all wearing the harried expression of those who have delayed their Christmas shopping until the last possible moment. Sam Morris and his two clerks looked equally harried as they tried to wait on several people at a time.

Ken and Sandy chose the least crowded area along the glass-topped display counter that bisected the store lengthwise, running back toward Morris's partitioned-off workroom at the rear. After they had waited for a few minutes, Sam, hurrying past with a heavy mahogany mantel clock, noticed their presence.

"I'll be with you as soon as I can, boys," he murmured. He put the clock down in front of a woman several feet away, told her to take her time examining it, and came back to where Ken and Sandy stood.

"This is the box, Sam," Sandy explained, lifting it out of its carton. "The catch broke when it fell. See?"

Sam studied the injury, murmuring, "Nice workmanship. Nice. Yes—ought to be able to fix that all right."

A hand holding a wrist watch thrust itself between the two boys, and a voice behind them said politely, "Excuse me. Could you put a new crystal in this watch while I wait?"

Down the counter the woman studying the mahogany clock called out, "Mr. Morris, I think I like the one you showed me first. May I see that again?"

"I'll be right back," Sam muttered, and hurried away.

"I certainly picked a fine day to break the crystal of my watch," the man behind the boys said, and they turned to smile sympathetically into his pleasant middle-aged face. "If it weren't such a good timepiece, I'd let it go for a while, but I hate to have it get dirty."

When Sam hurried back, looking more harried than ever, he shook his head at the customer behind the boys. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I'm mighty busy today, and it takes quite awhile to cement a crystal into place." He took the small iron box from Sandy's hands.

The owner of the watch spoke up quickly. "Don't bother with cement," he said. "If you could just snap a crystal into place, I could get it cemented after Christmas, in New York. I'm just passing through Brentwood and—"

Sam shrugged. "All right. I could do that. Come back in about half an hour." He took the watch. "You too," he added to the boys. "I'll try to have this ready by then. Won't take me long—if I just have a chance to get at it." He moved rapidly toward the partition at the rear.

"He's certainly an accommodating gentleman," the owner of the watch said, as all three of them began to edge their way through the crowd together.

"He certainly is," Ken agreed. "If I owned a store I wouldn't open the doors on Christmas Eve."

"See you in half an hour," the man said with a friendly wave as they separated on the sidewalk to go in opposite directions.

Back at the office they found Richard Holt in the middle of one of the lively tales he always brought back

from his trips. "And they found that the phones in the police chief's own office were being tapped," he was saying. "So—" He broke off as the boys entered. "What luck?" he asked.

"It'll be O.K.," Ken told him. "Sam said we could pick it up in half an hour."

"Good," his father said.

"Good," Pop echoed, almost absent-mindedly. "Go on, Dick. Did they ever find out who was doing the wire tapping?"

Richard Holt grinned. "It was the old woman who cleaned the office. They certainly never would have suspected her—she looked too old and harmless. But she got jittery finally, and disappeared. And they were curious enough to investigate. Now, I understand, you can't get a job cleaning the municipal offices there unless you're recommended by the prime minister himself."

"Wow!" Bert said. "What a yarn! Did they track down the rest of the gang then too?"

"What's this all about?" Ken wanted to know. "Start from the beginning."

"It's not a very lively story, except for the old lady," Mr. Holt assured the boys. "Just an ordinary tale of slick counterfeiters, though they did have an expert engraver capable of turning out beautifully engraved ten-dollar bills. United States bills, that is, which are always popular in Europe, and therefore easy to pass. Of course the banks could spot them, and they did eventually—a few at a time. But as long as the gang had its wire-tapping service in operation, it could keep informed as to police suspicions—and shift its plates and its printing

apparatus to a new location if the police began to make inquiries in the neighborhood where they were."

"Did they track down the gang?" Bert persisted.

"Unfortunately not," Richard Holt admitted. "And you can imagine how the police chief felt, under the circumstances. He's pretty sure they've cleared out of his territory, but of course that's not enough to satisfy him. And of course the U.S. Treasury isn't very happy about it either. Last I heard, it was sending some T-men over to lend a hand, because the counterfeits were American bills."

Bert nodded. "Those T-men work fast. We received a circular here about six months ago, about some bad twenties that were turning up in this vicinity. But before we could print the story, the counterfeiters were nabbed. Of course," he added, "most counterfeit bills here are made by the photoengraving process, and that's pretty crude compared to a good engraving."

Pop grinned. "People complain these days about the low standards of craftsmanship, but in some ways it's a help. There aren't many engravers in this country who can turn out a good set of plates, and what few there are, are working for the Bureau of Engraving in Washington or for some legitimate private business."

"Of course there was one case, years ago," Holt said. "I was just a cub reporter at the time, but I happened to be involved. I remember . . ."

He was off on another yarn. Almost an hour went by before Sandy happened to glance at the clock.

"Hey!" He jumped up. "Sam Morris said half an hour."

The wail of a siren and the sudden clanging of the

fire-engine's bell seemed to put an exclamation mark at the end of his sentence.

"Vacation or no vacation, a fire is news," Pop said. He reached for the phone, dialed rapidly, and spoke a few brisk questions into the mouthpiece. Then he slammed the receiver down.

"Get going, Ken," he said. "You too, Sandy. This might be good for a picture. The fire's at Sam Morris's jewelry shop!"

CHAPTER III

A SCRAP OF FILM

THE AREA in front of Morris's store was one of vast confusion. A hook-and-ladder truck blocked it off from the east and a chemical truck from the west. Traffic had piled up behind both of them, in a solid mass. And the sidewalks were jammed with people. It looked as if everyone in Brentwood had converged on the spot.

The voice of Andy Kane, chief of Brentwood's five-man police force, rose over the hubbub. "All right, keep moving there!" he shouted. "There's nothing to see here, folks. Keep moving!"

Ken and Sandy squeezed through to him. Chief Kane glared when he saw them. "There's nothing for you here either," he said. "That's the fire—the whole thing!" He pointed a scornful finger at a metal wastebasket standing in the middle of the street, still smoking faintly but now safely covered with the white foam from chemical extinguishers.

"So that's all it is!" Sandy's glance took in the busy policemen, urging the crowd along, the two great fire

engines with their coils of hose, the firemen in heavy black waterproofs, and the jammed traffic.

"This is something the fire chief will want to remember," he said with a grin. "See you later," he added to Ken, and disappeared into the crowd with his camera.

A few minutes later Ken spotted him on the roof of Morris's two-story building, aiming his lens at the crowd below and at the small foam-shrouded wastebasket at its center. When Sandy rejoined Ken again he was still grinning.

"I'll print this up for the chief's New Year's card," Sandy said. Then he straightened his face quickly as Chief Dick James emerged from the jewelry store.

"Everything under control, Chief?" Ken asked.

James nodded shortly. "Total damage one wastebasket and a black smudge on about five square feet of wall. Quick thinking on Sam Morris's part, of course," he added, "or it might have been a real fire. The minute he saw flames coming out of the basket he picked it up and carried it into the street."

"How'd it start?" Ken asked. "Cigarette?"

James shrugged. "Probably. Or a still-burning match. People are so danged careless. Wonder it doesn't happen oftener, the way they toss stuff around."

Sandy, bending over the wastebasket, sniffed curiously. "Smell this thing, Chief," he said. "Maybe it's my imagination."

"What are you imagining?" But James bent over the basket and took a deep breath. Then he looked up with the same puzzlement that Sandy showed.

"All right, masterminds," Ken said. "What gives?"

"Film," Sandy said. "Or at least that's what it smells

like. But why would there be film in Sam's basket?"

"That's a good question," James said. "Let's go ask Sam if he's got the answer." But before they went inside the shop he called one of his men over and instructed him to take the wastebasket to the firehouse and examine it carefully.

There were fewer customers inside the store than there had been earlier, but otherwise it looked very much as it had earlier that morning. Sam Morris, wearing a smoky streak down one cheek, came forward to speak to them.

"Sorry about all the excitement, Chief," he said. "Your box is repaired," he added to the boys.

"Gosh!" Ken said. "I'd forgotten all about it."

"Would there have been any film in that wastebasket, Sam?" James asked.

"Film?" The jeweler looked blank. "What kind of film?"

"We don't know," James said. "We're not even sure if that's what it was, but that's what it smells like."

Sam shook his head. "I don't know what was in the basket. It stands over there, beneath that desk." He pointed to a writing shelf built against one wall, for the use of customers who wanted to fill out cards to enclose with gifts. "It's usually almost empty, except for a couple of cards that have been blotted or spoiled, or maybe an empty cigarette package. I don't know why anybody would have thrown film in it."

"Film is inflammable stuff," James pointed out. "Maybe somebody wanted to start a fire in here."

"A pyromaniac?" Sam looked unbelieving.

James shook his head. "I was thinking of a crook—a

man smart enough to start a fire, so that he could make off with a handful of rings, or watches, during the excitement. Have you checked your stock, Sam?"

Morris shook his head. "It didn't occur to me. I had the basket out in the street in a couple of seconds, and then I came right back in. My clerks were here all the time." He smiled wearily. "There wasn't half as much excitement in the store as there was out in the street after the trucks arrived."

"Where were you when the blaze started up?" James asked.

"Behind the partition—in the workroom." Morris gestured toward the rear wall broken by a single door and a windowlike gap above a ledge. "I'd just finished putting in a watch crystal for the man who was here when you boys were in earlier," he added to Sandy and Ken. "He'd been waiting for a few minutes and I was just handing him his watch through the window there when one of the customers yelled 'Fire!' I saw the smoke right away, and I ran out of the workroom through that door and carried the basket to the street."

"You don't know what merchandise was out on top of the counter at the time?"

"No, I don't, Chief. But I can find out." Morris hurried off and held brief consultations with both his clerks. When he came back he looked relieved.

"There were no small items being displayed just then," he said. "One clerk was showing electric percolators, and the other was displaying cut glass to one customer and selling a smoking set to another one at the same time."

James still didn't look entirely satisfied. "Check your

rings and watches and other small stuff as soon as you get a chance, Sam, and let me know if anything's missing."

"All right," Morris agreed. "But I still don't think there was anything deliberate about that fire. It must have been just a careless smoker who threw a match in the basket."

"You didn't see that happen, did you?" Sandy asked.

"No—and my clerks didn't either. I asked them. We were just too busy to be looking around."

"Sure." James nodded. "Well, maybe we're guessing wrong about this film business. But if we run down anything we'll let you know."

"Don't forget your box, boys." Morris hurried back to the window in the rear partition, reached a hand through, and lifted it from a shelf just inside the opening.

"How much do we owe you, Sam?" Ken asked.

Sam smiled. "Since when do I charge a good friend for a few minutes' work?" He shook his head. "Go on—beat it. Just see if you can get it home without dropping it again."

The boys thanked him and left the store with James.

"Give us a ring if you really do turn up some film in that basket, will you, Chief?" Sandy asked.

"Sure."

Back in the *Advance* office Ken handed the box to his father. "We've got Mom's present all right, but we haven't got much of a story."

"We haven't got much of a story yet," Sandy corrected him.

"What does the 'yet' mean?" Pop demanded, while

Richard Holt lifted the cardboard lid and assured himself that the catch on the little iron box was now in perfect working order.

Sandy explained the possibility of incendiarism. Bert's automatic hoot of laughter died when he realized that Chief James shared Sandy's suspicion.

"But if Sam says nothing was missing, it doesn't sound like a grab-and-run deal," Pop pointed out.

"He doesn't *think* anything is missing," Sandy reminded him. "He might still find—" He broke off as the phone rang.

A moment later Sandy was talking to the caller who had asked for him.

"No kidding?" he said. "About six inches? And thirty-five millimeter, huh? Did you find a cartridge or a spool?" He listened for another moment and then said "Sure. Thanks, Chief," and hung up.

"I guess you all heard that." There was a note of triumph in Sandy's voice. "They found a six-inch scrap of thirty-five-millimeter film in the wastebasket. My guess is it's the remains of a roll for a candid camera like mine."

"That still doesn't make it an incendiary job," Bert said firmly. "Probably some customer of Sam's had just picked the roll up at a drugstore, where he was having it developed. He looked at it while he was waiting in Sam's, saw that it was no good, and threw it away."

"Could be." Richard Holt nodded his agreement. "Of course anybody should know better than to throw film into a public wastebasket where it might cause just this kind of trouble. But there are always careless people around."

"Write just a brief paragraph on the fire, Ken," Pop said decisively. "Then, if Sam does report anything missing among his stock, we'll go to work on it." He turned to Dick Holt. "Did Sam do a good job on your box?"

"Perfect," Ken's father assured him.

"Fine. I'm not surprised. Sam's a good man."

"And he wouldn't let us pay for it, Dad," Ken said.

Pop smiled. "I'm not surprised at that either. Here, I'll help you with that, Dick," he added, as the correspondent brought out the wrapping paper and ribbon he had put into his overcoat pocket that morning at the house.

Ken and Sandy were alone in the office that noon. Pop and Bert had carried Richard Holt off to their weekly lunch club meeting.

"Don't cook up any more mysteries," Bert had warned as he left.

"Mysteries!" Sandy made a face at his brother's disappearing back. "Every time we ask a simple question we're accused of stirring up trouble."

Ken slipped a sheet of paper into his typewriter and twirled the roller. "We don't do badly," he said, smiling. "Maybe they've got some reason to suspect us."

Sandy stared. "Whose side are you on, anyway? You were the one who started the whole business this morning."

"Sure—sure. And I'm not satisfied about that business yet. But I guess maybe it was a little too much when we came tearing in with talk about an incendiary fire. Especially," Ken added pointedly, "in view of something I remember you telling me a while ago."

"What was that?" Sandy asked.

"You told me that modern camera film is called safety film because it does *not* go up in flames, fast—the way film used to do."

"That's right," Sandy agreed. "It doesn't."

"Then why would anybody deliberately try to start a fire with film?" Ken asked.

Sandy smiled. "A really smart crook wouldn't, maybe," he admitted. "If he was somebody like you, for example, who had had the benefit of my educational conversation. But film used to be very inflammable, and it probably still has that reputation with a lot of people."

Ken looked unconvinced. "I still don't think it was very smart of you to become suspicious just because you smelled film in that basket. After all, if a man plans to rob a jewelry store, and his success depends on a good rousing fire, you'd think he'd look into the subject a little first. That he'd make sure he had the right materials on hand."

"Well, I thought maybe this wasn't carefully planned," Sandy said argumentatively. "Couldn't it have been done on impulse—on the spur of the moment? In that case you might easily duck into a drugstore and buy a roll of film. It's easy to carry around. It's not noticeable. It's—"

"Wait a minute!" Ken broke in suddenly. "Maybe it all fits together!"

"Maybe all what fits together?"

"It's the iron box—Mom's present! That's what's doing it." Ken folded his arms over his typewriter and rested his chin on them, staring at the gaily wrapped

package that now stood on Pop's desk. "Yes, that's it. I'm sure of it." His voice was tense.

"Are you out of your mind?" Sandy demanded. "What are you talking about? What's the little iron box—?"

"Listen," Ken said. "It's all perfectly obvious. That box is important to somebody. The somebody, whoever he is, knew Dad was bringing it home with him. He—the somebody, I mean—went to Dad's apartment last night looking for it. It wasn't there. He knows something about Dad—at least enough to realize that he was coming to Brentwood. So later last night he tried to break into the house here, but I scared him off. He must have hung around, saw that we were taking the box to Sam Morris's this morning, and made another attempt there."

"And there he is foiled again!" There was laughter behind Sandy's mock-dramatic voice.

"Right," Ken said. "Because, as you explained to me yourself, he made a bad choice of material for his fire. He wants to create a diversion. He has some vague idea that film is inflammable, and dashes into the nearest drugstore to get some. He slips into the crowd at Sam's, drops it into the wastebasket, along with a lit match, and then—"

Sandy, openly grinning now, picked it up. "And then sees his whole villainous dream go up in a tiny cloud of smoke."

"Right," Ken said again, more firmly than ever. "Because, for one thing, the fire only lasts a second. And, for another, that man waiting for his watch crystal is standing right in front of the window, unconsciously

protecting the box on the shelf inside. Sam told us he was there when it happened. Remember?"

"Oh, I remember all right," Sandy admitted. "But the whole thing sounds like a hallucination, my friend. In the first place, why would anybody particularly want the box? Your father told us it wasn't valuable—that he picked it up from the porter in the Rome office."

"It's an antique," Ken pointed out.

"Sure. So is any old stone you can find in a field."

"Look," Ken said, "I don't know *why* anybody wants the box. But it looks to me as if somebody does. I was right about somebody breaking into the house last night. You were right about the film in Sam's wastebasket, which is certainly an odd place for film to be."

Sandy stood up abruptly. "O.K.," he said. "Maybe we can check that part of your nightmare, anyway. If somebody bought that film with the deliberate purpose of starting a fire, he probably got it in Schooley's photo shop right across the street from Sam's. Let's go and find out."

They grabbed their coats and started for the door. Ken picked up the box from Pop's desk on the way.

"I think I'll keep my hands on this—just in case," he said.

The photographic supply shop was as crowded as Sam's store had been. Several minutes went by before the boys could catch the attention of one of the clerks.

But finally one of them said, "Hi, Sandy. What is it today? Film or flash bulbs?"

"Neither," Sandy told him. "Just some information. Did you sell a roll of thirty-five millimeter this morning?"

The clerk's eyebrows rose. "Are you crazy? I must have sold at least fifty. In case you don't know it, chum, tomorrow is Christmas and quite a few people seem to want to take pictures that day."

"I know," Sandy said, "but—"

"Wait," Ken interrupted. "Let's put it this way. Did you sell any to a man who either didn't seem to know anything about film, or who didn't care what kind he bought?"

The clerk's eyebrows rose another fraction of an inch. "Of all the idiotic—" he began, and then stopped. He looked at the boys sharply for an instant, and then called over his shoulder to a fellow clerk. "Rick! Got a second?"

Rick left his customer who was examining a small camera and joined them. "What's up?"

"Didn't you tell me about some queer duck who came in this morning to buy film and didn't know what size he wanted or what speed or anything?"

Rick nodded. "Sure. He just asked for film. When I asked what size, he said it didn't matter. And then when I kind of stared at him he said it was for a little camera. I figured he meant a miniature job, so I suggested a cartridge of thirty-five millimeter and he said that would be fine. But he didn't know whether he wanted color film or black and white, and he didn't know what I was talking about when I mentioned high-speed stuff. I finally gave him a spool of the cheapest film we have, just to get rid of him."

Ken made an effort to keep his voice calm. "Do you remember what he looked like?"

"I probably wouldn't remember my own mother if

she came in here today," Rick said with a grin. "But I do recall one more funny thing about that guy," he added suddenly. "Right after he left I had to reach into the front window for a camera some customer wanted to see, and I noticed him crossing the street. The dumb cluck was opening the cartridge box and exposing the film to the light! He's sure going to be in for a surprise when he tries to take pictures with it."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Ken said, beginning to pull Sandy away. "I doubt if he planned to take any pictures at all."

CHAPTER IV

BOOBY TRAP

THE CUCKOO stuck his head out of the old wall clock to announce that the hour of seven had arrived. But nobody in the Allen house that evening bothered to listen to him.

Tiny Mom Allen, in a rustling new housecoat, appeared unaware of even the wild litter of crumpled paper wrappings and ribbons that surrounded her. In her lap lay the iron box, and her fingers were already busy fitting together the bits of velvet with which she was lining it.

Pop was smoke-screening the room with a handsome new meerschaum that Richard Holt had brought him from Europe, and happily leafing through a huge new world atlas that had so far provided an answer for every question he could contrive.

Bert, resplendent in a British tweed sports coat, swung his new golf clubs one by one, in reckless arcs that threatened every window and every piece of bric-a-brac in the house.

Richard Holt was trying out a new portable type-

writer, a lightweight model especially designed for globe-trotters like himself. "It even spells better than my old one," he had announced.

Ken, after an hour's experimentation, was still finding new gadgets on the chronometer his father had bought for him in Switzerland. It was a stop watch and completely waterproof, and it told the date and the phases of the moon as well as the hour of the day.

"Got it!" Sandy's exclamation broke a long silence. He gestured with the tiny camera he held in his hand. "I knew this thing must have a delayed-action timer on it some place—it's got everything else. And I finally found it."

He made a few swift adjustments on the little mechanism, moved a lever, and then set the camera down on the table, lens toward the room. It made a faint buzzing sound. Sandy waded through torn papers to his mother's side, putting his arm around her shoulders an instant before the buzzing stopped with a sharp click.

"How do you like that, Mom?" he demanded. "I just took our picture."

"Doesn't seem possible that anything so tiny could really work," Mom said.

"It does, though," Sandy assured her, returning to the table to reset the camera that was only half the size of a cigarette package.

"No more of me," Mom said firmly, getting up and putting her box on an already well-laden table. "I have to get those dishes cleared away. Any volunteers?"

Pop peered at her through the haze of smoke. "My old army training, Mom, taught me never to volunteer for anything."

"In that case," Mom said, "I'll have to draft you."

Finally they all got up and followed Mom into the big Allen kitchen. She excused Sandy and Ken from duty, on the grounds that they had done the dishes the night before, and put Bert to work at the sink. Ken's father and Pop dried.

"Bring me my box, Ken," Mom said, when she had everyone organized. "I've got so much help here I can get back to work on my velvet lining."

The brightly lighted room gave Sandy all the opportunity he needed to make further use of his new camera.

"I can't wait to finish up this first roll," he explained, taking one picture after another. "As soon as it's done I'm going right down to the office and develop it. Hold it, Bert. Just one more. There, that does it."

"Guess I'll go along," Ken said. "Want to come, Dad?"

"I do not," Holt said. "Holding this dish towel is all the activity I can manage after so much excitement. Besides, I'm husbanding my strength for tomorrow's turkey."

The boys, having decided to walk the few short blocks to the *Advance* office, put on their heavy lumberjackets. But when they went through the front door Ken turned back toward the rear of the house.

"Hey," Sandy said, "I thought we were going to leave the car."

"We are. I just want to check something." Ken followed the walk they had cleared that morning, until he was standing outside the kitchen windows. "I just want to see how much of the room is visible from out here,"

he said quietly. "Hmm. Practically all of it, except the corner where the door leads into the hall."

"So what?" Sandy demanded.

"So now we know that if somebody was standing out here last night," Ken answered, leading the way back toward the front sidewalk, "he could have seen us put the iron box in the shoe box, and leave it there on the sideboard."

Neither of them spoke for the distance of a block. Their feet were crunching on the snow at a cross street when Sandy said, "Well, so long as you don't quote me, I'll admit that business at Schooley's this afternoon has me a little worried. I still don't see exactly why you're fastening on the box as somebody's special target, but it does all sound slightly fishy. I don't think we'd get any sympathy if we talked about it at the house, though —especially now that your father's here, to help Pop and Bert out with their usual ribbing."

"We won't tell them about it until we have some more proof," Ken assured him.

"More proof?" Sandy emphasized the first word.

"Sure." Ken ignored the skepticism in his voice. "I think we've already got some. And if somebody makes another attempt to break into the house tonight—"

"Huh? Nice cheerful thoughts you have." Sandy scooped up a handful of snow and packed it thoughtfully between his gloved hands. "But maybe you're right. At least you may be near enough right so that we ought to put the chains on both doors tonight." Sandy hurled his snowball at a hydrant and hit it squarely.

"Why?"

"Why?" Sandy repeated blankly. "Because you just

told me somebody might be planning to try to get in."

"Exactly. And if the attempt fails, we'd have no proof that it ever happened."

"Perhaps," Sandy said politely, "you could express yourself a little more clearly. It would require a great effort, of course, but won't you just try for my sake?"

Ken grinned. "In words of approximately one syllable," he said, "what I'm suggesting is that we make it easy for someone to get in, but that we be on hand to catch him. In other words, that we set a booby trap."

Sandy gave one loud agonized groan and then announced that he refused to discuss the matter. Down in the basement darkroom, beneath the *Advance* office, he went about the business of mixing up his developing solutions in dignified silence. With a great show of concentration he figured out a method for suspending the tiny film from his new camera in a tank designed for much larger film. He turned out the lights, put the roll into the tank, fastened the lightproof cover in place and then turned the lights on again.

"Let's see," he muttered to himself. "I'm using the finest grain developer I have. I'd better give it fourteen minutes." Carefully he set his timer.

"While I'm here," he said then, still talking to himself, "I might as well develop that print of the fire this afternoon. If I want to print it up in time to mail to Chief James as a New Year's card . . ."

Once more his hands were busy, and he turned the lights off and on again.

"There," he said finally. "If it's a good negative I'll make a nice big print of it, so he can hang it up in his office, labeled 'Firemen at Work.' "

For the first time since they had come into the darkroom he turned around to look at Ken. His black-haired friend was conscientiously rocking the first film tank back and forth, as Sandy had so often asked him to do in the past.

"Thanks," Sandy said. "That ought to be enough now."

"You're quite welcome. Any time." Ken sat down, stretched out his legs, and stared up at the ceiling.

Sandy's mouth finally split in a wide grin. "All right," he said. "I give up. What kind of booby trap?"

Ken spoke as if there had been no interruption in their conversation.

"The important thing is to set it without the folks knowing anything."

"You can say that again," Sandy murmured.

"So we can't do much about it until everybody's in bed." Ken looked down at his new watch. "I can't tell if it's quarter to nine or December twenty-fourth."

"It might be both," Sandy said helpfully.

"By gum, I believe you're right." They grinned at each other briefly. "O.K.," Ken said then, "you have just proved what I always suspected—that you're the mechanical genius in this outfit. You figure it out."

"What's difficult about it? We leave the chains off both doors. We sit in utter darkness—in the living room, say, where we couldn't possibly be seen by anybody entering either door. And when somebody comes in—*if* somebody comes in—" His involved sentence broke off in a vast yawn.

Ken yawned too. "He finds us," he said, when he could speak, "fast asleep. He takes the box. He de-

parts." He sat up and shook himself. "That is not my idea of a booby trap."

The timer bell rang just then, and for the next several minutes they were busy. The activity roused them a little, but before the films were hanging from their drying clips both Ken and Sandy had yawned again.

Sandy tried to examine the tiny strip of film with a magnifying glass. "It looks great," he muttered. "Wish it were dry already, so I could try printing them up. Wonder how big an enlargement I'll be able to make."

"Look," Ken said, "don't start getting any ideas about staying down here half the night to work on them. If the rest of the family is half as sleepy as we are, they'll be turning in early tonight. And we'd better be there if we really want to watch for a visitor."

"All right," Sandy agreed. "I'm coming. I offer only one slight correction to your theory. We'd better be there—with a cup of coffee."

When they turned the corner into the Allen's block their suspicions about others being as sleepy as they were themselves seemed confirmed. The living-room light winked out as they watched, and a moment later the light went on in the big corner bedroom that belonged to Pop and Mom Allen. There was also a light in the room Richard Holt was occupying. Bert's room was already dark.

"Ken—Sandy—is that you?" Mom called down as they let themselves in.

Sandy answered with a standing family joke. "No, Mom. There's nobody here but us chickens."

"Well, I just wanted to be sure," Mom replied calmly. "There's some cake left—and plenty of milk."

"Thanks, Mom." Sandy lowered his voice. "Let's not rattle the coffeepot. Let her think we're having our usual quick snack before going to bed."

It was half past ten when they turned out the kitchen light, leaving the entire house in darkness. Quietly they tiptoed into the living room and settled themselves on the couch.

"Don't get too comfortable," Ken warned, "or you'll fall asleep."

"Don't worry. I'm wide awake now."

There was a few minutes of complete silence.

"You're sure you're awake?" Ken whispered.

"Huh? What?" Sandy stirred.

Ken poked him. "This is never going to work," he said. "I was almost asleep myself. Coffee has certainly been overrated as a stimulant."

"We could take turns," Sandy murmured. "If I just took a short nap now, you could—"

"No, you don't," Ken said. "Get up. Walk around a little."

"In a room littered with Christmas presents? I'd stumble over something right away and wake up the whole house."

"Well," Ken said, "I told you to rig up a booby trap."

"Come on." Sandy stood up, a shadowy figure in the faint light reflected into the room from the moonlit snow outside.

"Where are you going?"

"To rig up a booby trap. To fasten a lot of noisy pots and pans up over the door, so that even if we are asleep we'll hear anybody trying to get in."

"Those things never work," Ken said.

"Mine will," Sandy insisted. He crossed the room to the desk and cautiously prodded among its cubbyholes. "This is what I want—this light adhesive tape."

Then he led the way to the kitchen where they opened the cupboard door as quietly as possible and lifted out a six-quart kettle and several smaller pans.

"Pie tins," Sandy whispered. "They make a good clatter."

"Got them," Ken murmured.

Using small pieces of tape they fastened several pans over the back door, so lightly that the opening of the door would be sure to pull them from their place.

"If anybody opens this enough even to put a finger in, these things will come down," Sandy whispered.

"If they don't come down by their own weight the minute we turn our backs," Ken added.

"Don't criticize. A booby trap was your idea," Sandy reminded him.

By the time the clock struck eleven the front door had been similarly rigged, and the boys were back in their place on the couch.

Stillness settled over the house. A board, creaking by itself in the dry night air, sounded like the noise of a pistol shot. The ticking of the clock at the far end of the room was as clear and distinct as if it were right beside them. When a car passed several blocks away both boys roused out of a near sleep and came to their feet. But after a few seconds of tense waiting they settled down again sheepishly.

"We going to stay here all night?" Sandy asked, when the cuckoo had struck twelve and then twelve thirty.

Ken answered him with a warning hand on his arm.

There were footsteps on the porch steps. Both boys listened intently, every nerve alert. Ken could feel Sandy's big body tense itself for action.

Carefully they came to their feet. With Sandy in the lead they drifted silently across the carpet, following the path they had cleared for themselves earlier.

There was a fumbling at the outer storm door, which was unlocked as usual.

Ken had one finger ready on the light switch. Sandy was crouched low, ready to pounce.

Metal scratched faintly against metal. Hands worked cautiously at the lock of the inner door. An almost inaudible rattle told them that the mechanism was clicking open. The knob began to turn.

Then the door itself eased slowly open. And suddenly, with an unearthly clatter, the pots and pans rigged above it crashed to the floor, cascading over a figure outlined in the doorway.

As Ken snapped on the light, Sandy leaped forward. His arms circled the intruder, and the two heavy bodies thudded to the floor.

Ken barely had time to notice that Sandy was safely on top when a shout sounded from upstairs.

"Hey! What's going on?"

Ken lunged for the intruder's feet and hung on. "It's all right, Pop!" he called. "We got him!" Out of the corner of his eye he could see Pop Allen tearing down the stairs, with Richard Holt right behind him.

"You've got me all right." The muffled voice spoke from somewhere beneath Sandy's considerable weight. "But why?" it grunted. "Just tell me why?"

Ken's hands jerked away from the feet he was hold-

ing as if they had burned him. In the same instant Sandy rolled aside, freeing his victim.

And then both boys scrambled hastily out of the way as a furious red-faced Bert, pushing aside pots and pans, got slowly to his feet.

"Gosh!" Ken said. "Gee, Bert—we thought you were upstairs asleep!"

"Sure," Sandy echoed. "We thought—"

Then Sandy looked at Ken and Ken looked at him. There didn't seem to be anything else to say.

CHAPTER V

THE MISSING OUNCES

IT WAS only when the glistening brown turkey was carried to the dinner table the next day that the boys had any relief from the constant barrage of kidding they had been receiving all morning.

"I never thought I'd have to urge the menfolks of my family to put their minds on food," Mom said, "but that is exactly what I'm doing. The boys have had enough teasing. After all, they're not always wrong."

"Thanks, Mom," Sandy said, sliding into his chair.

"All the same," Ken said, "I still—"

"If you start all over again, Ken," Mom warned, "I won't be responsible."

Ken smiled at her. "O.K., Mom."

Dinner conversation was limited to murmured comments about the food, which Richard Holt insisted was better than any he had ever had in the most famous restaurants of the world. And after dinner a heavy peace settled on the household, broken only when occasional callers dropped in for brief holiday visits. Outside it had grown slightly warmer, but the gray sky

promised more snow. By six o'clock heavy snowflakes were falling steadily.

Richard Holt roused himself from a sleepy contemplation of the fire. "This is no night for you boys to drive me into New York," he announced. "I'll take the train instead."

"Why don't you just stay over until morning?" Pop suggested. "Doesn't look as though this will last long. The roads should be better then."

The correspondent shook his head. "Wish I could. But I promised Granger I'd be in early tomorrow morning to talk over that Washington assignment." He turned to the boys. "Unless you're actually snowed in here I'll expect to see you tomorrow, as we'd planned. I'll meet you at the apartment in the afternoon, and we'll have dinner before the wrestling matches." He got to his feet. "Anybody have a timetable?"

"There's a train leaving here at six fifty," Bert told him.

"Good. I can make that easily."

"We'll at least drive you to the station, Dad," Ken said.

"And afterward we'll print up those negatives, so we can bring them in tomorrow to show you," Sandy added.

About an hour later Sandy was proudly studying the first print from his new camera. "Look at this," he told Ken. "A four-by-five print from a negative less than half an inch square! That little peanut certainly has a wonderful lens."

"Mmm," Ken murmured. "Great."

Sandy dropped the print back into the tray and pre-

pared to enlarge the next image on his tiny strip of film. "Wish we'd gotten a picture of Bert snowed under by pans last night," he said, grinning over his shoulder.

"I think that event will live in our memories all right without a picture to remind us," Ken assured him.

The phone rang as he finished the sentence and he reached out to pick up the darkroom extension.

"Hello. Brentwood *Advance,*" he said automatically. . . . "Oh, Mr. Morris. . . . Yes, this is Ken." He listened for a moment. "No, we don't," he said then. "Never saw him before. . . . Really? Well, he'll probably get in touch with you. I don't see why you should have to worry about it."

"What's up?" Sandy asked, when Ken hung up the receiver a moment later.

"Sam Morris wanted to know if that man with the broken watch crystal was a friend of ours," Ken reported. "He remembered seeing us talk to him."

"Why?" Sandy asked, his voice preoccupied. He was using a magnifier to focus the image being projected on his enlarger easel.

"The man had just given Sam a twenty-dollar bill to pay for his crystal when the fire started," Ken explained. "Sam stuffed the bill in his pocket as he ran out to pick up the wastebasket, and when he came back later to give him his change the man had disappeared. Sam thought he could send him his change if we knew who he was."

"Nobody else but Sam would worry that much about it," Sandy said. "Anybody else would figure that if the man wanted his change he'd come back for it—or remember it in the first place."

"I know." Ken dropped into a chair. "But the man said he was just passing through Brentwood, remember? Maybe by the time he realized he'd forgotten his change he was too far away to come back, and not knowing Sam's last name couldn't call him up. Anyway, that's how Sam thinks it was.

"Wish we could have helped him out," he went on after a minute. "For the man's sake as well as Sam's. I still think Mom would be out one jewel box if he hadn't been standing at that window when the fire happened."

"You can't prove that by what happened last night." Sandy grinned as he rocked a tray gently.

"How right you are. Especially," Ken admitted, "since I stayed awake until daylight and can practically swear nobody tried to get in the house all night."

"Were you awake too?" Sandy grinned again. "So was I—and without even trying. Every time I got sleepy Bert's face seemed to rise up before me and—"

"Same thing happened to me."

Neither of them spoke then for some time. Sandy worked steadily. Finally he said, "Here, make yourself useful. Take these prints out of the hypo and set them washing in the sink. I'm just going to print up that picture of the fire and then I'll call it a day."

"Sure," Ken agreed.

"Look at this," Sandy said a few minutes later. He was holding up a wet eight-by-ten print and pointing to one corner of it with a dripping forefinger. "Take a look at that car," he said, as Ken joined him. "The one parked right across the street from Sam's store."

"I'm looking," Ken told him. "What am I supposed to see?"

"The man in it leaning out of the window to see what's going on," Sandy told him impatiently. "Isn't he the one who was getting his watch crystal fixed?"

Ken bent closer. "Sure enough! Must have been caught in the traffic jam." He took hold of Sandy's wrist and held it so that light fell more clearly on the print. "Could you make the enlargement any bigger?"

"Sure. But why?"

"If we could read the license plate on that car maybe we could help Sam out after all."

"That's an idea. But we won't need a print for that. I'll just make a larger projection." Sandy dropped the wet picture back into the tray, adjusted his enlarger to a bigger image, and turned on the light. "Now you can see the number," he said, pointing to the tremendous image on the easel.

"Right. That does it." Ken copied the number off on a scrap of paper. "It's a New York license. And I'll bet Dad can get the car owner's name from the New York Motor Vehicle Bureau. We'll phone him when he's had a chance to reach home."

Sandy's prints were all washed and on their drying boards by the time Ken got his father on the telephone. Richard Holt laughed when he first heard Ken's request.

"Don't tell me you're on the track of another mystery," he said. "After last night—"

"This is something else, Dad," Ken broke in hurriedly. He explained about Sam Morris's phone call and their subsequent discovery of the watch-owner's car in Sandy's print. "Sam was so nice to us we just thought we ought to try to help him out."

"You're right," Richard Holt said quickly. "We should. I'll call Global and have the agency's Albany man put in an inquiry. Ought to have the owner's name for you tomorrow."

"O.K. Swell, Dad. Sandy says to tell you the little camera's a honey," he added before he hung up.

"You ready to go home now?" he asked Sandy.

"I will be in a minute. Just want to take these prints off the boards. Most of them are dry now." One by one he began to lift them from the chromium plates, examining each one as he turned it face up. "Look at them," he said admiringly, reaching for his magnifying glass. "I could enlarge them to eight-by-tens and still have pretty sharp prints!"

"Do your gloating at home," Ken suggested. "I wouldn't have thought it possible, but I believe I'm actually hungry."

Sandy grinned. "Turkey sandwiches sound pretty good to me too." He put the prints into an envelope and slipped them into his pocket, along with his magnifying glass. "All right. Let's go."

As they walked away from the *Advance* office Sandy said, "If there's any of the dressing left I could do with some of that too. And maybe even a piece of mince pie."

Ken seemed too preoccupied to comment on the suggestion, and when he finally spoke, Sandy had driven the convertible halfway home. "There could be just one reason for anybody wanting that box badly enough to burglarize two houses and set a fire," he declared. "It must be valuable."

"Now, look," Sandy protested, maneuvering the car

carefully along the ruts of a snowy street. "We've been through this. Your father said the box wasn't valuable. He ought to know. Besides, after last night—"

"Dad isn't an expert on antiques," Ken interrupted. "The only reason he thinks it isn't valuable is because he apparently didn't pay very much for it."

"Well, apparently the man who sold it to your father didn't think it was very valuable either, or he'd have asked more for it," Sandy pointed out reasonably.

"Maybe he had his own reasons for selling it cheaply," Ken said darkly. "Dad assumed it was part of the porter's own household stuff—heirlooms, I suppose —that he was selling off because he was broke. But suppose Dad was fooled? Suppose the box was stolen and offered to Dad inexpensively, just so he'd buy it and bring it through American customs. Then the idea would be to steal it from him, once it was here, and sell it for its real value."

"But it hasn't been stolen," Sandy reminded him. "Nobody tried to get it last night. Besides, there's a hole in your argument big enough to drive a truck through. If a valuable box had been stolen, the customs authorities would have been alerted to watch for it. And no matter how well they know your father by now, they'd have shown at least a little curiosity when he turned up with something they'd been warned to watch out for. In fact, they'd probably have landed on him like a ton of bricks."

"Well, maybe it isn't *that* valuable," Ken admitted. "Maybe it's not the sort of thing that would arouse an international hunt."

Sandy laughed. "I see. It's only valuable enough to

cause two burglaries and an attempted arson. You're just not making sense, Ken."

Sandy had driven the car into the Allen garage, but he made no effort toward getting out. "I'm not going into the house with you while you're still on this subject," he announced. "I've stood all the ribbing I want to take for one day. Well? Are you convinced?"

Ken smiled faintly. "I'm convinced that your arguments are unanswerable—for the moment," he admitted. "But do you honestly believe there's no connection at all between that unlocked door at Dad's apartment, the attempted entry into the house here, and the fire at Sam's?"

Sandy ran his gloved hand through his hair. "I'll go this far: I'll agree they make a curious string of coincidences. And you know how I mistrust coincidences. But don't ask me what the connection is. And don't expect me to believe that the box is a priceless antique." He turned the door handle. "And don't go on about this when we get inside," he added menacingly.

"All right," Ken agreed. "I'm with you there."

The rest of the Allens were already in the kitchen. Pop, towering on one side of his tiny wife, was slicing generous slabs of white meat from the turkey carcass. Bert, towering on Mom's other side, was cutting bread. Mom, between them, was making sandwiches.

"Ha!" Bert said. "The demon sleuths—and probably on the trail of food this time."

"Lock up the pots and pans, Mom," Pop contributed.

"Now that will do," Mom said firmly. "Boys, get the milk from the icebox and get some glasses."

Sandy brought his pictures out as soon as they had

sat down, to ensure a safe subject of conversation. "Look what that little camera can do," he announced proudly.

The strategy was effective. Even Bert became engrossed. And half an hour later, when the boys were left alone in the kitchen to clean up, Bert forgot to warn them against setting further booby traps as he went up to bed.

"I'll wash," Ken said. "We'd better put these things away before they get splashed," he added, beginning to gather together the prints still spread out among the dishes.

Suddenly he halted and bent low over the table. "Where's your magnifying glass?"

"Here," Sandy said, handing it to him. "Why?"

Ken was holding one print close to the light and peering at it through the glass.

Sandy grinned proudly. "Is that the one where you can even tell what time it is by the kitchen clock?"

"It's the one of Mom sitting alongside the cupboard. But look where the box is—the iron box, I mean."

Sandy shrugged. "I remember where it was then—on the kitchen scale. Mom put it there while she was working on the lining."

"And you put it there the night Dad got home. Remember?" There was mounting excitement in Ken's voice. "Just before Dad dropped it."

"That's right. I did. So?"

"Then you said something about how much it weighed. Do you remember what you said?"

Sandy looked at him questioningly, but a moment later he obediently wrinkled his brow in an effort to recall the moment. "Let's see. I said something about

how heavy it was for its size. And—wait—I think I said it weighed exactly four and a half pounds."

"That's what I thought you said!" Ken sounded triumphant. "But take a look at this. The box didn't weigh that much last night when you took this picture. Look what the scale shows here. It's considerably under four and a half. Isn't it?"

He handed the picture and the magnifying glass to Sandy, and Sandy studied the print carefully. "You're right," he said slowly. "But this is a tiny image. Maybe—"

"Let's check up. Mom hasn't got the lining fastened in yet. The box must weigh just what it did last night."

Ken disappeared for a moment and came back carrying it in his hands. He put it on the kitchen scales, and both boys watched silently as the pointer swung back and forth in diminishing arcs. Finally it came to rest.

"Four pounds and five ounces," Sandy said wonderingly. "But how can that be? I must have been wrong the other night. But I was sure—" He broke off abruptly. "Could Sam have done anything to the box to reduce its weight? Do you suppose he had to take something off in order to fix it?"

Ken was still watching the scale as if fascinated. "He just straightened the bent lever. Even if he had removed it entirely that wouldn't have reduced the weight by three ounces."

He looked up, finally, into Sandy's puzzled face. "I don't think this is the same box Dad brought home," Ken said.

CHAPTER VI

UNEXPECTED CALLER

SANDY shot Ken one startled glance. He picked the box up and hefted it in his hands, as if he might be a better judge of its weight than the scales could be. Then he put it slowly down again.

"How could it not be the same box?" he demanded. "When could a substitution have been made?"

"At Sam's," Ken said quietly.

"You mean you think Sam would—?"

"No, of course not," Ken interrupted. "But whoever wanted the box—wanted the real one, I mean—found out that we had taken it there for repairs, and when we would come back for it."

"This imaginary character you're talking about must have a crystal ball," Sandy said scathingly.

Ken shook his head. "Just a broken watch crystal." Sandy stared at him unbelievingly, but Ken went on. "What could have been simpler than breaking a watch crystal, if somebody wanted an excuse to follow us into Sam's store and find out how long the box would be there?"

Sandy ignored the question. Instead he asked one of his own. "And do you also have a 'simple' explanation for how the switch was made?"

"Of course," Ken replied calmly. "We've been thinking that it was fortunate the man with the watch crystal was standing in front of that partition window when the fire broke out. It wasn't fortunate. It was planned. It gave him the perfect opportunity to switch boxes and walk out of the store."

Sandy opened his mouth and shut it again.

"What?" Ken prompted.

Sandy grinned slightly. "I thought of something that supports your crazy theory. I was going to say it would explain why the man 'forgot' his change. He just wasn't interested in waiting around for it when he'd managed to do what he came for."

Ken solemnly shook his hand. "Congratulations. That clinches it."

"Now wait a minute," Sandy said hastily. "It doesn't do any such thing. We still haven't any idea why somebody should have wanted the box in the first place."

"I know. I know," Ken told him. "You've explained that once. If it's a stolen art treasure, Dad wouldn't have been able to bring it into the country. And if it isn't really valuable . . ." his voice trailed off.

"Exactly," Sandy said. "I must have been wrong about the weight that first night." His voice sounded almost pleading.

Ken ignored him. "Sam might be able to tell us if this is the box he worked on," he said suddenly. "Let's check with him tomorrow." He straightened up, as if relieved at having reached a decision. "And now let's

finish up here, before Bert comes down to see if we're scheming up some new trick for his downfall."

They were in Sam Morris's store by nine the next morning, the iron box under Sandy's arm. Mom had gone off right after breakfast to see her sister, so they had been able to borrow her present without arousing her suspicion.

"Broken again?" Sam Morris asked, as Sandy unwrapped the package.

"No. It works fine, Sam. We just need your help in settling an argument. Would you look at this thing carefully and tell us if it's the one you repaired?"

"One of you boys thinks that perhaps it isn't?" Sam looked puzzled.

"No." Ken smiled at him. "But we have reason to believe the box is lighter now than it was when my father brought it here. And we didn't see how the repair job could have changed the weight."

"It didn't. I just straightened the lever. Do you think I exchanged your box for another one?"

"Of course not," Ken assured him.

"But you think maybe someone did, eh?" Sam fitted his jeweler's glass into his eye. "It sounds like nonsense, but let's have a look."

After several minutes he removed the glass and shook his head. "I can only say that I *think* this is the same box I worked on. The lock mechanism is the same. But I was in too much of a hurry to inspect the box carefully. Still, I couldn't testify under oath that this is it."

The phone rang and Sam excused himself to answer it.

"Satisfied now?" Sandy asked Ken.

Before Ken could answer, Sam was calling him.

"This is for you, Ken," he said.

Ken was smiling when he came back from taking the call. "It was Pop," he explained. "Dad phoned and gave him the information from the Motor Vehicle Bureau." He handed Sam Morris a scrap of paper with a name and a New York City address written on it. "This is the man you were asking us about—the one who left without the change from his twenty-dollar bill."

Sam's eyes widened. "How did you learn who he was?"

The boys explained, and Sam shook his head in admiration. "Such a smart idea. Now I can send Mr. Barrack his money."

"Maybe you ought to write him first and make sure it's the right person," Sandy said. "Maybe the man you want was just sitting in a car that belongs to somebody else."

Sam looked worried. "Do you think that's likely?"

"I'll tell you what, Sam." Ken spoke up. "We're going to be in New York tomorrow and we'll check on it for you. Dad's apartment is right near this address. It won't be any trouble. Then you can be sure you're sending the money to the right man."

Sam had to be persuaded. He insisted the boys had already gone to enough trouble, by learning the name and address.

"If he has a phone we'll just call him up," Ken pointed out. "And even if he doesn't it will only take a few minutes to run over there."

"Well, if you're sure—" Sam said finally.

"Fine," Ken interrupted. "We'll let you know what

we find out. And thanks for checking the box for us."

Sandy waited until they were outside the store and then he spoke. "I don't suppose you have any ulterior motive in offering to get in touch with—what's his name?—with this Barrack fellow?"

Ken grinned. "You have a low suspicious mind."

"It's not nearly as suspicious as yours," Sandy retorted. "You have no reason to believe that box is valuable. And Sam didn't exactly support your idea of the thing having been switched—"

"He didn't say he was *sure* it was the same box," Ken interrupted. "And I still think it's possible that Dad brought home a valuable antique, and that somebody stole it and left in its place a worthless modern copy—the one we've got now. But don't worry. I've thought of a way to check up on that theory. We'll take the box in to Felix Lausch at the Metropolitan Museum and ask his advice."

"That's an idea." Sandy's eye lit up at the thought of the art expert who was Richard Holt's friend and who would, both boys knew, give them any aid he could. "If Lausch says this is an old box, but not worth very much, then we'll write the whole thing off as a bad dream. Right?"

"Fair enough," Ken agreed.

Before they left for New York, some time before noon, they wrote a note to Mom and left it on the kitchen table.

"We're borrowing your new jewel box so we can show it to Mr. Lausch," it read. "Hope you won't mind. We'll take good care of it."

Sandy stared at the note dubiously as they departed.

"She'll mind, all right," he said. "Mom likes to own antiques, and she even brags about 'em once in a while. But she'll think we're crazy to take one all the way to New York to show to an expert." He shrugged. "Well, come on. But I'm going to tell her it was all your idea, when she starts lighting into us."

By two o'clock that afternoon they were climbing the stairs to the Holt apartment on Seventieth Street. There was a scrawl in Ken's father's handwriting propped against the phone. "Call me at Global when you get in," it read.

Ken dialed the number and talked briefly to his father, completing arrangements for meeting him later on.

"We're eating at Dominick's," he reported to Sandy. "And Dad says he's already called Dominick and warned him, so we ought to be prepared for something special."

Sandy beamed. "Swell. That sounds like spaghetti. How long have we got to work up an appetite?"

"Until six thirty."

"I could do it in half that time," Sandy said.

Ken ignored him. He was leafing through the New York telephone book. "Barnes . . . Barotti . . . and here's a Barrack, Charles. But no Amos Barrack. Guess our friend with the broken watch crystal doesn't have a telephone."

"Maybe it's unlisted—like your dad's," Sandy suggested. "I tell you what. Call information and ask her if there's any phone at all at his address. If it's an apartment house there might be one in the lobby."

"That's a good idea. Then we could at least leave a message for him." Ken twirled the dial, made his re-

quest, and a moment later was scribbling down the number he had been given.

"Only one phone at that address, listed under the name of Marie Mallory," he reported, as he began to dial again. "I'll try it."

The ringing was answered shortly by a woman who spoke so loudly that Ken had to jerk the receiver away from his ear to avoid being deafened.

"Is there a Mr. Barrack there?" he asked. "A Mr. Amos Barrack. I'd like to speak to him if it's possible."

"He's not here now," the woman bellowed. "He works. He'll be home tonight, I guess. He's got a room here. I'm the landlady. Any message?"

"My name is Holt," Ken answered. "I'm calling Mr. Barrack about something he left in Brentwood the other day. . . . That's right. Brentwood. Would you tell him that, please, and ask him to call me this evening?"

"Sure. I'll tell him. What time?"

"Eh—let's see." Ken calculated quickly. "I won't be here until after eleven o'clock."

"All right. I'll tell him," she repeated.

Ken gave her his father's number and then hung up, holding his hand to his long-suffering ear. "She said—"

"I heard her," Sandy assured him. "And now let's go see Lausch and get that off our minds, so I can start concentrating on spaghetti."

Felix Lausch declared that he was delighted to see them. He inquired for his friend, Richard Holt, insisted upon showing them one or two of his department's newest acquisitions, and then took them into his private office and settled them comfortably.

"Now," he said, leaning back in his chair, "what can I do for you? You're not involved in another one of those investigations you two seem to get into, are you?"

Ken grinned. "Sandy says we're not. But I'm wondering if you could tell us anything about this box?" He unwrapped it and put it on Lausch's desk.

The round-faced little man bent forward to look at it. "Just what did you want to know?" he asked. "This is not in my line, you understand—even though it does look Italian to me. But Italian paintings are a big enough field for one man. I am an amateur in all other aspects of Italian art."

"We'd like to know if it's really an antique," Ken explained, "and if it's valuable. We'd also like to know if there's any reason to think it might have been stolen recently—from some European collection, that is. Probably in Italy."

Lausch's stubby finger traced the scrollwork on the lid of the box. "I could make a guess at the answers to your first two questions, but that's all it would be. I think you would rather have the opinion of an expert." He picked up his phone and asked for a number. "Sintelli is a dealer in Italian antiques," he explained. "He should be able to help. As for your last question, I can only say I've seen no notice of the theft of any such box as this."

He waited an instant and then he was saying, "Sintelli? . . . Lausch here. Tony, I've got a question for you—three questions, in fact. I've got what appears to be an old Italian box— . . . What? . . . No, a small box. Iron, with a lead lining. I want to know if it's old, if it's valuable, and if it might have been stolen recently

from some European collection—public or private. . . . Yes, I think so."

He looked up at the boys. "Can you leave it here? Sintelli will pick it up and return it in the morning."

Sandy hesitated only a moment. "Sure. But he won't hurt it, will he?"

Lausch smiled. "It would be too bad if we experts had to ruin everything we examined. No, it will be quite safe." He spoke into the phone again briefly and then hung up. "Tony will drop it off here tomorrow about ten, on his way to his shop. So I'll have a report for you any time after that."

They were halfway to the door a few minutes later, on the way out, when Ken turned back. "There's just one other thing. Suppose I wanted to have an exact copy of that box made. Could it be done?"

Lausch shrugged. "There are craftsmen good enough to copy anything, I suppose, if one knows where to find them. It would probably be an expensive job, however. But I'll check that with Sintelli too. He'll know."

Over the red-checkered tablecloth at Dominick's that night Ken told his father about the inquiries they had set in motion about the iron box. Mr. Holt looked slightly amused, but just as he was about to comment, at the end of Ken's recital, he glanced at his watch.

"Come on!" he said, leaping up. "The first match begins in a few minutes. We're going to have to leave before they're over, anyway, if I'm going to catch my Washington plane. So let's not miss the beginning."

The wrestling matches were particularly exciting. Conversation, as the boys and Richard Holt watched them, was limited to shouts of encouragement and

howls of dismay. And Ken's father made no reference to the box as they drove him out to the airport.

But as he got out of the car there, with a minute or two to spare, he turned back for a final word.

"I'm not going to tell you to drop this iron box mystery you've cooked up," he told Ken. "That wouldn't do any good." He grinned at his son. "But I think Sandy's reasoning is sound. If the box is valuable—if it's been stolen, say—I'd never have been allowed to bring it through customs. And if it isn't, why go through any hanky-panky about it, as the British say?" He took his brief case off the seat and slipped it under his arm. "In any case, take it easy. I'll be back the day after tomorrow. You'll be in Brentwood then?"

"Probably, Dad," Ken said.

"But we're not going back until we've used the basketball tickets you've left us for tomorrow night," Sandy added.

"Have a good time." Holt raised his arm in a farewell salute and disappeared through the doors of the terminal building just as the loud-speaker announced the ten-thirty flight to Washington.

It was a few minutes past eleven when the boys let themselves into Holt's apartment.

"I hope we haven't missed Barrack," Ken muttered.

"Don't worry. He'd try again if he didn't get us the first time. He must have remembered by now what it was he left in Brentwood. I don't suppose there's anything in the refrigerator, is there?" Sandy added thoughtfully as he hung up his coat.

"Probably not," Ken agreed. "When Dad's only at home for a day or two he—"

But Sandy had already opened the refrigerator and the expression on his face made it unnecessary for Ken to look inside.

A note pasted to the inner side of the door read, "I figured you'd be hungry before bedtime."

"Cold ham," Sandy was chanting, "cheese, milk, oranges . . ."

"And there's bread and a pie in the breadbox," Ken added, peering under the lid.

Sandy rubbed his hands. "Well, what'll we have for our first course? How about—?"

The sharp sound of the buzzer cut him off. The boys looked at each other in surprise, and Ken shrugged as he walked into the hall to press the button that released the lock on the downstairs door. Sandy was behind him as he opened the apartment door and thrust his head into the hall to listen. They heard the lower door shut, and then the sound of mounting footsteps.

A moment later a slender, neatly dressed man about thirty-five years old rounded the last bend in the stairs and came into view. He smiled at them as he came up the last few steps.

"Holt?" he inquired politely, looking from Sandy to Ken.

"I'm Ken Holt."

"I'm Amos Barrack," the stranger said. "My landlady told me you phoned about something I left in Brentwood."

Ken was trying to collect his scattered wits. "But you're not the man we thought you'd be."

Barrack smiled. "And I don't know what I left in Brentwood. Nothing, so far as I know. I thought maybe

I'd better drop by and get it straightened out tonight."

The boys stepped back from the doorway.

"Come on in," Ken said, and closed the door behind their visitor when he had stepped into the foyer. "Sit down, won't you?" He led the way to the living room. "We seem to have caused you some unnecessary trouble," he added, as Barrack settled himself somewhat tentatively on the nearest chair. "But we were trying to do you a favor." He smiled.

"A favor?" Barrack sounded more puzzled than ever.

Ken glanced at Sandy to see if he wanted to explain, but Sandy's expression told him that this was his problem.

"It's this way," Ken began. "The day before Christmas a man stopped in at Sam Morris's jewelry store in Brentwood—that's where we live—to have his watch crystal replaced. When he returned to pick it up he paid Morris with a twenty-dollar bill. But just at that moment a small fire broke out in the store. Just a little blaze in a wastebasket. When the excitement died down and Morris looked around for his customer a few minutes later, to give him his change, the man had disappeared. Morris was worried about it, and eager to find the man and give him his money. So—"

"But what made you call *me*?" Barrack interrupted.

Ken explained, briefly, about the picture Sandy had taken and how they had traced the car's license number. "But, of course," he concluded, "if you've never been in Brentwood we must have made a mistake somehow. Maybe we didn't read the license number correctly."

"But I was there that same day," Barrack corrected

him apologetically. "I should have explained that. And my car was parked opposite a jewelry store—right at the time the fire happened, as a matter of fact. But I didn't go inside the store at all. And I can't understand—"

He broke off suddenly and his puzzled look gave way to a smile. "It must have been my passenger," Barrack explained. "I'd forgotten all about him until this minute."

Ken and Sandy both smiled too.

"Good," Ken said. "Then if you know who it was—"

Barrack shook his head. "But I don't. I guess it's my turn to explain. I'm a salesman for the Tobacco Mart—a company that sells smokers' supplies. I was on my way back from a trip through the Pennsylvania territory that day, and one of my customers in some little Pennsylvania town asked me if I could take a passenger to New York. A friend of his, I guess. He didn't want to have to take the local into Philadelphia, and then another train on from there. It's a long trip that way. I agreed, of course, and the fellow came along. I thought he stayed in the car while I stopped to make a call in Brentwood—I cover New Jersey too—but for all I know he might have broken his watch then and gone across the street to have it fixed."

"And you don't know who he was?" Ken asked.

"Haven't the slightest idea." Barrack looked regretful and then he brightened. "My Pennsylvania customer would probably know, though. I could ask him the next time I go by there and then let you know." He got to his feet.

"Thanks," Ken said. "We'd appreciate that—or,

rather, Sam Morris would. He doesn't like to owe people money."

"But probably the fellow will write to the jeweler and ask for his change before long," Barrack pointed out.

"Probably," Ken agreed. "Anyway we're sorry to have bothered you."

"No bother at all," Barrack assured him. "I was kind of puzzled. Thought I'd stop in and find out what it was all about."

Their good-nights were brief but polite. But the door had scarcely closed behind Barrack when Sandy grabbed Ken's arm.

"We could ask him the name of his customer," he said, "and call the man up." He reached for the doorknob. "Why didn't we think of that while—?"

Ken's hand found the doorknob first and held it. "Don't bother," he said. "There's no use trying to get any honest information out of that gentleman."

"Huh?"

Ken locked the door and slipped the safety chain into place. "I didn't think of this myself until he was giving his little spiel about his passenger, but this phone here is unlisted. Dad's name isn't in the phone book."

Sandy stared at him. "What's your father's phone got to do with Mr. Barrack—or anything else?"

"But the phone number is all I left with Barrack's landlady. I didn't give her this address."

"Oh," Sandy said. "I see. And he couldn't have got the address by asking the phone company for it, because they don't give out that information."

"Right," Ken told him. "At least they don't give it to anybody but the police. And Barrack's no policeman."

"Then how *did* he know how to find us," Sandy asked, "without telephoning first?"

"Probably," Ken said slowly, "because he'd been here before—looking for the box."

CHAPTER VII

AN EXPLODED THEORY

SANDY repeated Ken's last words in a sort of daze. "He'd been here before looking for the box?" He shook his head to clear it. "You mean the night your father got back? When the door was found open in the morning? You think Barrack was here then?"

Ken nodded. "Barrack or somebody involved with him. How else would he have known this address?"

Sandy shrugged. "He might have learned it in a hundred different ways. But suppose for a minute you're right. In that case why would he come back here now? Why wouldn't he avoid us?"

"He probably wanted to find out how much we know —or suspect," Ken said.

"Well," Sandy told him grimly, "you may suspect plenty. But even you don't *know* anything." He started briskly across the room. "He looked perfectly all right to me." He picked up the phone book and leafed through it. "Here it is—the Tobacco Mart. So that part of his story wasn't invented, at least. It's on Chatham

Square. That's down at the edge of Chinatown, isn't it?"

"That's right," Ken agreed. "And he may even work there. Or, if he doesn't, he's made some arrangement for the company to vouch for him if anybody should make inquiries."

"That what you're planning to do?"

Ken considered the question seriously. "I don't know at the moment."

Sandy grinned. "But don't tell me you're not planning to do anything. That would be too good to be true."

Ken looked at him for a moment and then he grinned back. "You don't sound as convincing as you think you do. If I didn't think up a plan of action, you would—and you know it."

Sandy bristled for a moment and then gave it up. "O.K.," he said. "I admit I'm curious about the whole business. And if Lausch has some interesting news for us in the morning—"

"But that won't be until ten o'clock," Ken pointed out. He walked toward the kitchen, with Sandy at his heels, and opened the refrigerator door. "And in the meantime," Ken went on, putting milk and bread and ham and cheese on the table, and beginning to cut bread for sandwiches, "I'd like to keep an eye on Barrack's rooming house in the morning when it's time for him to leave for work. Maybe he'll go down to the Tobacco Mart. Maybe he won't."

"Maybe he'll start right out on his sales route."

"Anything's possible," Ken agreed. "I just want to be there to see."

It was more than cold at six thirty the next morning

when Ken hurried Sandy out of the apartment and along quiet gray streets toward Barrack's address. It was bitter. Ken had pointed out that Sandy ought to wear a hat, to hide his all-too-obvious red hair, and for once Sandy had raised no objections. But he had complained loudly when Ken insisted that they both put on sunglasses, to further conceal their identity.

"If you don't think dark glasses will look crazy, in the dead of winter—" Sandy began.

"They're a protection against snow blindness," Ken told him. "Go on. Put them on."

They walked quickly, their chins buried in their coat collars, until they reached the corner of Barrack's block.

"You stay here and I'll go up to the next corner," Ken suggested. "That way we'll be able to pick him up whichever way he turns when he comes out of the house."

"All right. But if he doesn't come out soon I'll be picking up double pneumonia instead," Sandy warned.

"We'll both follow him, but not too close together," Ken went on. "And if one of us should lose him—if we should get separated—we'll meet at the museum at ten o'clock."

The icy minutes dragged slowly by. But actually it was barely seven o'clock when Ken caught sight of Barrack. The man was dressed this time in a battered hat and well-worn overcoat, and he was walking briskly toward the corner where Ken stood.

Ken could see that Sandy had already left his own post and was coming along behind Barrack. Ken stepped hastily inside a convenient hallway.

He waited there until Barrack passed by, and then

sauntered slowly in the man's wake, giving Sandy a chance to pass him.

As Sandy went by, Ken said quietly, "I'll be behind you. Looks like he's heading for the Seventy-second Street subway station."

"Check."

Ken's prophecy was accurate. They boys took up positions on the station platform on either side of Barrack to make sure he didn't leave by another entrance, and only moved in toward their quarry when a train slowed to a stop before them. They watched him board a car by its center door and then, screened by other riders, they entered the same car by the doors at either end.

The train was an express, and it rocketed its way downtown without a stop until it reached Times Square. Barrack didn't even look up as the train stood in the station there. He was engrossed in a newspaper.

But at Thirty-fourth Street, the next stop, he made his way hurriedly out of the car. When he reached the street the boys were both fairly close behind him, and Ken cautiously dropped back another twenty feet.

Barrack walked west on Thirty-fourth Street at a rapid pace until he turned abruptly and entered a cafeteria. Sandy waited on the sidewalk until Ken came up.

"Do we go in?"

"Better not. You stand inside this doorway here, and I'll take the one beyond the cafeteria."

Sandy glanced longingly toward the warm steamy interior, but he didn't argue.

Barrack was out again in less than fifteen minutes, to continue his rapid pace westward. Sandy moved out

into the stream of pedestrians in his wake, and Ken fell into position behind him.

Barrack turned south when he reached Eighth Avenue and walked along that busy truck-crowded street until he had passed the rear of Pennsylvania Station. At Thirty-second Street he swung westward again, to walk briskly past the block-long bulk of New York's main post office.

There were fewer people abroad in that neighborhood. The boys could fall farther behind and still keep their quarry in sight. At Ninth Avenue, Barrack waited for a traffic light and then hurried past the halted vehicles. A moment later he vanished from sight through the doorway of a huge building.

Sandy waited for Ken to catch up, and they stood for a moment on the sidewalk.

"Either he'll come right out again, or he'll take an elevator," Ken said.

When the second hand on Ken's new chronometer had ticked off two full minutes, they drifted into the lobby with the stream of workers obviously hurrying toward an eight-o'clock deadline. The four elevators along one wall each swallowed up a dozen or more with every ascent. Ken and Sandy glanced around, saw no sign of Barrack, and slid through the crowd to study the building directory on the rear wall.

It was obvious from the names listed on it that the entire building was devoted to printers, paper dealers, and ink companies.

"That's funny," Sandy said. "What would he be doing at a printing trade center? I guess you were right after all. He *was* lying about where he worked."

"I didn't say that," Ken reminded him. "And an employee of the Tobacco Mart might have perfectly legitimate business in a place like this. Maybe he came to pick up a batch of labels or printed containers." He glanced at his watch. "Let's wait outside awhile and see if he comes back down and goes some place else—to Chatham Square, say."

They found a sheltered doorway a few yards down the block and did their best to keep warm by stamping their feet. But the icy chill crept through their overcoats and into their very bones.

At nine o'clock Sandy said grimly, "I've had enough of this. I'll agree to anything. Barrack lied about the Tobacco Mart. He's really a printer. Or he's an international crook who steals rubies to melt down into red ink which he ships around in iron boxes. Have it any way you like. But if I don't get some hot coffee pretty soon—"

"All right," Ken interrupted, to Sandy's amazement. "This doesn't seem to be getting us anywhere. I'll agree to leaving here now—after all, we have to get up to the museum, anyway—if you'll agree to coming back here about noon. Then, if Barrack does work here, we ought to be able to pick him up again. Maybe—"

"I told you I'd agree to anything," Sandy said, starting toward a lunchroom sign he had spotted a block away. "Anyway, by noon we'll have the information from Lausch and maybe you'll be willing to call this whole thing off. This is supposed to be our Christmas vacation, remember? I—"

"You'll feel better when you've had some breakfast," Ken assured him.

They did feel considerably better, although Sandy was still mumbling dire forebodings about frostbite in both feet, when Lausch opened his office door to them an hour later.

"Good!" The little art expert beamed. "Sintelli has just sent back your box, and the answers to all your questions. But come in. Come in and sit down near the heater. You must be cold if you have walked here from my friend Holt's apartment."

"Hah!" Sandy said under his breath. "If that's all we'd done—!" But at a glare from Ken he broke off and moved toward the chairs Lausch was pulling into place for them.

"First," Lausch said a moment later, smoothing out a sheet of notes on his desk, "you wanted to know if the box is really old." He smiled at them over his glasses. "It is—definitely. Sintelli didn't make any spectroscopic tests of the metal, but he said that wasn't necessary. He is quite certain that the box was made not less than three hundred years ago."

Ken gulped. He was aware of a convulsive movement on Sandy's part—the beginning of a vast guffaw that Sandy nobly controlled.

"I see." Ken gulped once more, and turned his head to avoid Sandy's glance. "What else?"

"You wanted to know if the box is valuable," Lausch went on. "And in this case," he said, cheerfully unaware of Ken's reaction to his first statement, "I'm afraid you will find the news not so pleasant. Sintelli says this box is in excellent condition, but that even so it is not worth more than fifteen or twenty dollars in American money."

"Is that all?" Ken's voice cracked on the words.

"Unfortunately yes." Lausch nodded. "So many of them were made at the time, you see, to be used—apparently—as small money boxes. They can be found in numerous antique shops."

"Very interesting. Ve-ry interesting," Sandy said in a curious choked voice.

"Sintelli was quite surprised at your third question," Lausch went on. "He doesn't know why you thought such a box as this might have been stolen from a museum or anywhere else. They're not valuable or rare enough to merit inclusion in a collection—or to merit the risk of stealing, for that matter."

"Ken will have to refer to his crystal ball for an explanation of that," Sandy murmured.

Lausch glanced at him questioningly. "I didn't quite understand you."

"Nothing—nothing," Sandy said hastily. "Let's see. There was one further question, wasn't there?"

"Yes," Lausch referred to his notes once more. "Could such a box be duplicated, you wanted to know. Sintelli doesn't know why any craftsman would attempt it. As I said, the boxes themselves are readily available and inexpensive. And, besides, their only charm lies in the fact that, being handmade, no two were exactly alike. An exact duplication would seem pointless. And a modern craftsman would probably charge more to make such a thing than you would pay for an original box."

"But it could be duplicated—if there was any reason for doing such a thing?"

Ken knew that Sandy's persistence was deliberate. He was turning the knife in the wound, paying Ken

back for that long vigil in the cold that morning.

"Quite easily, of course," Lausch answered seriously. "Even the imperfections—the tiny roughnesses in the design, owing to the poor tools of the period—could be perfectly reproduced by means of a plaster cast. It would take a little ingenuity, perhaps, and patience. But it would be by no means impossible or even very difficult." He leaned back in his chair. "Does that satisfy you?" he asked.

Sandy, obviously enjoying himself, answered him. "Oh, perfectly," he said. "It all fits in perfectly with a little old theory Ken had whipped up." He dropped a heavy hand on Ken's shoulder in mock congratulation. "Doesn't it, Ken, old boy?"

CHAPTER VIII

A PACKAGE CHANGES HANDS

"MUST HANDLE THIS with great care," Sandy said a little later as the boys let themselves into the Holt apartment. He deposited Mom's jewel box on a table and patted it gently. "Valuable antique—very valuable. Worth almost a dime a dozen. Unless, of course," he added, cocking his head on one side and studying the box intently, "it is instead an ingenious copy of a valuable antique, made by some nefarious criminal."

"Go right ahead. Enjoy yourself," Ken told him, slumping into a chair without bothering to remove his overcoat.

Sandy swung around to grin at him. "You can't blame me, can you? When a mastermind like yourself gets really tangled up in his own theories—when he is knocked out by the weight of his own genius— Now where are you going?" he demanded as Ken got up and started toward the boys' bedroom in the rear of the apartment. Sandy followed him.

"It doesn't concern you," Ken told him. "And it's got nothing to do with the box." He began to change into

a pair of tweed slacks and a flannel shirt. "I was obviously way off the beam about that. You were probably mistaken about the weight of it the first time, and if we accept that, then there's no reason to think there's anything fishy about the box at all."

"You haven't answered my question." Sandy, entirely serious now, sat down on the edge of the bed. "What's the idea of changing your clothes? Where are you going?"

For a moment Ken didn't answer. And then he said reluctantly, "Well, this will give you another laugh. But I'm going down to that building where we left Barrack this morning. I'm still curious about him."

"I see," Sandy said.

"Do you?" Ken smiled briefly. "Well, that's more than I do. But somehow I—" He broke off and pulled a heavy sweater on over his shirt.

Sandy took off the jacket of his suit and began to unbutton his shirt.

It was Ken's turn to ask a question. "What're *you* changing your clothes for?"

Sandy looked surprised. "For the same reason you are. So we'll look a little different from the way we did this morning—just to be on the safe side."

"Don't be a dope," Ken told him. "You don't have to come along. This is my hunch. And it's my—" He stopped.

" 'And it's my father.' That's what you were going to say. Weren't you?" Sandy demanded. "You don't like the idea of Barrack knowing his address, and I don't either. Especially after that mysterious open door here the other night. I agree with you. It's probably got

nothing to do with the box. But don't tell me it's got nothing to do with *me*—if there's any chance that somebody's interested in making trouble for Richard Holt."

For a moment neither of them spoke. Sandy busied himself getting dressed. But Ken knew that Sandy too was remembering the occasion when Richard Holt's nose for news had brought him into serious danger, when he had learned more than was safe for him to know about certain criminal activities. Ken had no real reason to suspect that Barrack was a criminal, or that Barrack's knowledge of his father's address was actually incriminating evidence. But Ken also knew that he himself wouldn't be satisfied until he learned a little more about the affable Mr. Barrack.

And Sandy's reaction didn't surprise him. Once Ken had let Sandy see that he was really worried, his red-headed friend would naturally insist upon standing by.

Ken made one more effort to keep Sandy out of what he believed to be his own problem.

"You're going to give me a guilt complex," he said. "If you get frostbite, standing—"

"Frostbite?" Sandy sounded amazed. "In these shoes?" He looked down at the heavy brogues he was putting on. "What are you trying to do? Give *me* a guilt complex? I agreed when we left that place this morning that I'd go back with you this noon, didn't I? Do you want me to go skulking around in corners for the rest of my life because I broke a promise?" He stood up. "Are you ready?"

For a moment their eyes met and they both grinned.

"Yes," Ken said then. "I'm ready."

The boys reached the building on Ninth Avenue a few minutes before twelve o'clock, just as the first trickle of workers began to emerge on their way to lunch. From a lobby across the street they watched the trickle swell to a steady stream.

Sandy leaned comfortably against a radiator. "Why didn't we find this spot this morning?" he asked. "This is my idea of comfortable sleuthing. When—" He came swiftly erect. "There he is! Let's go."

Barrack was just coming through the doorway, carrying half a dozen small cartons. He paused at a large mailbox designed for packages, standing against the building wall, and began to drop the cartons in, one after the other. The largest proved too big for the opening, and Barrack propped it on top of the mailbox instead. Then, with one package still tucked securely under his arm, he walked the few steps to the corner, and waited for a light. He apparently intended to walk eastward on Thirty-second Street.

"You take him," Ken said. "I'll be along in a minute."

He dashed across the street, between rumbling trucks, and took a swift look at the package Barrack had left outside the box. Then he turned and crossed Ninth Avenue again, in plenty of time to fall in a few steps behind Sandy. Barrack was walking swiftly eastward. Ken whistled a few bars of "Yankee Doodle," quietly, to let Sandy know he had caught up. Sandy replied with an answering whistle.

Barrack was following the same route he had taken that morning, in reverse. As he neared the cafeteria where he had stopped for breakfast, Ken gave a start.

Up ahead, apparently waiting for someone at the

cafeteria entrance, stood the man whose broken watch crystal Sam Morris had repaired on Christmas Eve.

In almost that same instant Ken saw Sandy sidestep into a shop doorway. He waited there until Ken came up.

Ken stopped and pretended to stare through the glass at a display of hardware and tools, while he continued to watch Barrack.

"You see what I see?" Sandy said.

Ken nodded.

"It sure is a small world," Sandy muttered. "And brother, when you get a hunch, it *is* a hunch!"

"I certainly didn't expect this," Ken assured him.

Barrack had reached the cafeteria doorway. He entered briskly through the revolving door.

"Funnier and funnier," Sandy muttered. "Did you see that? Barrack walked right past him!"

Ken nodded. Barrack had certainly seen the man. He had actually brushed against him as he entered. But neither had given any sign of recognition.

"And don't tell me," Sandy said, "that they couldn't recognize each other—not after they drove together for a couple of hundred miles."

"Look," Ken said. "Now Mr. Watch Crystal is going inside too."

"Come on," Sandy said.

They began to move toward the cafeteria.

A hasty glance through the wide plate-glass front of the big self-service restaurant assured them that it was very crowded.

"I think it's safe to go in," Ken muttered, "as long as we're careful to keep out of their way."

"This is the first time I ever went into a restaurant with my mind on something besides food," Sandy said. "Go ahead. I'll follow you in a minute. We'll be less conspicuous that way. Meet you at the tray counter if the coast is clear."

Inside the great brightly lighted room, rimmed with service counters, hundreds of men and women were milling around, intent on collecting a trayful of food or, if already laden with trays, on finding a vacant table where they could eat.

Ken stalled around at the tray counter, collecting an unnecessary amount of knives, forks, and spoons, until he caught Sandy's eye on him. Then he moved on to the water fountain. Sandy shortly joined him there with his own tray and an assortment of cutlery.

"Barrack's at the sandwich counter. Watch Crystal is standing in line in front of the hot table," Ken murmured.

They prolonged the task of filling their water glasses until Barrack, with an almost empty tray, made his way through the room to a table for six in a far corner. Two chairs at the table had been tipped forward, to mark the places as reserved. Barrack set his tray down in front of one of them, righted the chair, and sat down. He put the package he was carrying—it was about the size of a small suit box—on the floor near his feet. Then he began to eat his single sandwich, washing down the mouthfuls with swallows of coffee.

An irritated voice snarled at Ken's elbow. "That's the sixth time you've rinsed out that water glass. You going to stay here all day?"

Ken looked around into a pair of eyes as irritated

as the voice. "Sorry," he muttered, and moved away.

"We'd better get a sandwich ourselves," Sandy suggested. "We'll be less noticeable doing that than hanging around here."

They made sure that neither Barrack nor the second man looked their way as they hastily collected a pair of corned beef sandwiches and two glasses of milk. Then they sought out a table from which they could continue their observations.

They had just managed to find a satisfactory place when Sam Morris's former customer moved away from the food counters. His tray was crowded. It was easy to see why he had taken so long to collect his lunch.

He made his way straight between the crowded tables to the one where Barrack sat, lowered his tray to the space in front of the second tipped-up chair, and then sat down there. He didn't look at Barrack as he began to eat.

Barrack was almost finished by that time. He took the last bite of his sandwich, swallowed the last of his coffee, and stood up. Without looking back over his shoulder he headed for the door.

Sandy moved halfway out of his chair. "Should we follow him? Or—" He glanced back at the table where the second man was still eating. "Hey—look! Barrack forgot his package."

"I know." Ken's voice was tense. "Watch."

Just as Ken spoke, the man at the table dropped his napkin on the floor. Instead of reaching for a fresh one from the dispenser in the middle of the table, he bent down to pick it up. If the boys hadn't been watching him intently they would have missed what he did then.

As he picked up the napkin he also picked up the flat package Barrack had left on the floor, put it on his knees under his recovered napkin, and then went on eating. But now he seemed suddenly in a hurry, gulping his food in large mouthfuls.

"Never mind Barrack," Ken said. "Let's see where *he* goes." He picked up the second half of his sandwich. "I'll finish this outside. You stay here until he leaves."

"Right," Sandy agreed. He still had the surprised expression he had worn ever since the man first appeared at the cafeteria entrance.

Ken waited in the doorway adjoining the cafeteria until, a few minutes later, the man came out and moved purposefully toward the corner. Sandy was close behind him.

Their quarry descended into the subway station at the corner, and the boys followed. He boarded an uptown train and they got into the next car, standing where they could see him through the glass-topped door between.

When the train pulled into the Times Square station the man got off and headed for the street. But before he passed through the exit turnstile he suddenly reversed his direction, walking straight back toward them. Sandy froze where he was and, finding himself before a chewing-gum slot machine, tried to look as if he had been busy inserting pennies into it for some time. Ken, who had been slightly farther behind, had time to step behind a protective pillar.

But the station was fairly well occupied. They didn't dare let the man get too far away before they followed him. Sandy took up the chase.

Ken intercepted him as he came past. "Let me take the lead. He may have seen you. Drop behind."

In their new order, with Ken dogging the man's footsteps as closely as he thought was safe, they went through the maze of corridors and passageways that brought them to the crosstown shuttle-train terminal. They boarded a train already waiting on the nearest track and were whisked across Manhattan to the east side. There the man made his way down a flight of stairs to the station platform of a downtown subway.

From where they stood, at the head of the stairs, the boys could see him.

"You'd better stay up here," Ken said. "I'll go down on the platform. But try to get down in time to get on the train he takes."

A local train came into the station shortly after Ken descended the stairs. His quarry ignored it, pacing up and down with the package held tightly beneath his arm. Suddenly the man made for the stairs he had just come down.

Ken bounded after him, glad that Sandy was on guard on the upper level. He saw the redhead first when he reached the top and then, just beyond him, the man they were both following.

Sandy rounded a corner only a few yards behind the men. Ken trailed him. But as he rounded the corner himself he saw Sandy standing still, turning his head frantically from side to side. The man was nowhere in sight.

"Where'd he go?" Ken asked quickly, coming up beside Sandy.

"I don't know." Sandy spoke between clenched teeth.

"When I came around the corner—right behind him—he was already gone. He could be anywhere." His gesture took in an exit to the street level, and three stairways leading down to various train platforms.

Ken thought quickly. If the man had disappeared that fast, he must have gone down the nearest stairway.

"Let's try this," he said, and dove for a flight of steps that led to another section of the downtown subway platform they had just left.

There was an express train waiting in the station when they reached the bottom of the stairs, but its doors were already beginning to slide shut. A familiar shape caught Ken's eye. The man who had broken his watch crystal—the man who had picked up Barrack's package—was squeezing himself through one rapidly narrowing entrance.

The boys dashed for another door in the same car. Ken's fingers grabbed for the rubber edge of the panel in an effort to prevent it from closing. But he was too late. It slid shut with a small final thud. The train lurched into motion.

One by one the cars went past, at a swiftly increasing speed. And then the train disappeared entirely, except for the winking red light on the last car, growing smaller and smaller in the dark tunnel of the subway.

Ken let himself sag wearily against a pillar. "We could start a school," he said. "The Allen-Holt School of How Not to Shadow a Suspect."

CHAPTER IX

ONE MORE LINK

"WE'RE NOT LICKED YET. Come on." Sandy took hold of Ken's arm with sudden vigor.

"Come where?" Ken asked.

"Just follow me. It's my turn to have a hunch. But hurry!"

Sandy dragged him quickly to the top of the stairway, hesitated there a moment trying to orient himself in the confused underground labyrinth beneath Grand Central Station, and then demanded, "Which way is Lexington Avenue?"

"Over that way."

"That's the way we go then." Sandy darted toward the exit, and Ken followed.

Like a broken-field runner Sandy ducked, pivoted, and plunged through the crowd, with Ken always close behind him, until they emerged into the street. Just in front of them a taxicab was discharging a baggage-laden passenger. Sandy crossed the sidewalk in a single leap.

"Come on!" he shouted to Ken. To the driver he said, "Chatham Square—as fast as you can get there!"

Ken barely managed to pull the door shut behind himself as the taxi started off. He collapsed breathless against the cushions.

"Where's he taking us?" he asked, as soon as he could speak.

Sandy opened his mouth to answer, but the words were pushed back down his throat as the driver swung left, with wildly squealing brakes, an instant before the green light blinked off.

"Wherever it is," Ken gasped, "do we have to go in this much of a hurry?"

"It's Chatham Square," Sandy answered. "And we do."

Ken blinked. "What makes you think—?" He didn't bother to finish the sentence. The cab driver was sounding his horn so loudly, in impatience at a slow-moving truck up ahead, that speech was useless.

When the taxi finally rounded the truck and darted forward into the clear, Sandy answered the uncompleted question.

"I told you it was a hunch," he said. "But the Tobacco Mart's on Chatham Square, isn't it?"

Ken nodded. "So?"

"Well, Barrack said he worked there, but it looks now as if he doesn't."

Ken interrupted. "I haven't had a chance to tell you before, but the label on that package Barrack left on top of the box said Spectrum Printing Company."

"Then Barrack must have been lying about his job with the Tobacco Mart. Why would he have been mail-

ing packages for a printing firm if he didn't work there?"

"As a favor, maybe," Ken suggested.

Sandy ignored him. "I'm assuming, therefore, that he does *not* work for the Tobacco Mart. But the fact that he used its name must mean he knows the outfit—and may be tied in with it somehow. And therefore our friend Watch Crystal might also be tied in with it. Anyway, my hunch is that that's where he's going. If I'm wrong we haven't lost anything, except the price of the taxi fare."

"You think then," Ken said slowly, bracing his feet on the floor as the cab tore around another corner to head downtown, "that they definitely recognized each other in the restaurant—that the exchange of the package was a planned thing?"

Sandy stared at him. "What else could it have been? Sure, Barrack might honestly have left a package behind in a restaurant. And some stranger sitting near by might have noticed it, and been dishonest enough to pick it up and make off with it. Sure, it could all have happened that way. But not to those two. Not after Barrack admitted to us that he'd been with Watch Crystal the other day. Besides, there was something mighty smooth and furtive about the way that exchange was made. If that whole deal wasn't carefully planned I'll—I'll—"

"You can't eat your hat in this weather," Ken said. "It's too cold. You'll need it."

The taxi driver, skillfully edging his way through the traffic, spoke over his shoulder. "Any special number on Chatham Square?"

"No," Sandy told him. "Just drop us off when you get there."

A few minutes later the driver was saying, "O.K. Drop off. You're here—and fast, like you ordered."

"Swell. Thanks." Sandy added a tip to the fare registered on the meter.

When the taxi started back uptown the boys stood uncertainly for a moment on the sidewalk. Chatham Square was a junction point of several streets and alleys, all radiating out from its open area like the spokes of a crazily designed wheel. Evidence of New York's large Chinese population was everywhere.

The window of the drugstore just behind them was so covered with Chinese characters that no street number was visible. A sign on the adjoining building announced—in English—that tattooing was done on the premises, next door was a Chinese grocery whose windows were heaped high with strange items of food including a variety of dried fish and meat. A few steps beyond the grocery a blank wall was covered with large sheets of paper bearing freshly inked Chinese characters. Beneath them, in a cluster on the sidewalk, stood several Chinese huddled in warm coats.

"They're reading the news bulletins," Ken murmured, as Sandy stared. He let his eye wander farther around the square until finally he saw a street number on the front of a souvenir shop. "The Tobacco Mart must be down that way," Ken decided, gesturing toward the right. "Let's cross the square and try to sight it from there."

They dodged through the square's congested traffic, walked past a motion-picture theater whose lobby was

decorated with stills from Oriental pictures, and then backtracked quickly into the protection of the theater's posters. They had found what they were looking for—a weathered sign atop a dilapidated three-story building on the other side of the street. The sign read TOBACCO MART—*Smokers' Supplies and Novelties*—WHOLESALE ONLY. The two upper floors of the building were pierced by dusty blank-staring windows, the top ones dingily curtained. The street floor was fronted by glass display windows, but they had been painted black to a line above eye level, so that the passer-by could see nothing of what was beyond them.

Sandy shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other. "Well, there it is," he said unnecessarily. "Now all we have to do is see if my hunch—" He broke off because Ken had grabbed his arm.

"There's Watch Crystal!" Ken said. "Coming around the corner there! You were right!"

Instinctively they backed farther into the theater lobby as the man they watched hurried toward the entrance of the Tobacco Mart. He paused a moment in front of it and looked quickly around. His eyes, beneath a lowered hatbrim, surveyed the front of the theater opposite, and the upper stories of the buildings on either side of it.

Ken could feel his heart thudding heavily. He had no idea whether they had been noticed or not.

And then, as if satisfied, the man hurried through the black-painted door of the wholesale tobacco shop.

Ken took a deep breath. "Well," he said, "you sure outsmarted him! And I was ready to give up when he

disappeared back there at Grand Central Station. Do you think he spotted us—that that's why he was going through all those evasion tactics?"

"I don't know. Maybe he has reasons of his own for thinking that he's always in danger of being tailed. We can't even guess about what's going on here. We don't know enough. The question is," Sandy added, "how to go about learning any more. I suppose we could go into the Tobacco Mart and inquire the price of cigars by the thousand lot."

Ken shook his head. "No use tipping our hand—on the chance that Watch Crystal hasn't seen us yet." He glanced toward the cashier's window and saw that the ticket seller was already eying them with marked disapproval. "But we can't hang around here any longer. Let's see if we can't find a better vantage point, where we can keep an eye on the Tobacco Mart for a while. Then if Watch Crystal comes out and goes somewhere else—"

"Right," Sandy agreed. "If we follow him long enough we're bound to get some clue as to what he's up to."

They found what they were seeking almost immediately—an observation post that seemed custom-made for the job of watching the grimy store across the square. It was a small branch library—one of the many subdivisions of New York's huge public library system. It occupied a narrow building not more than twenty-five feet wide, but it appeared to use all three floors of the structure. In any case, as the boys could see through a large window running almost the full width of the building, the second floor was clearly a reading and

reference room. Several elderly men were seated there at broad tables, reading by the gray light of the winter afternoon.

"That's for us," Sandy agreed, when Ken suggested that they go in. "I'll keep an eye on the Tobacco Mart until you get set up there, and then I'll join you."

Ken pushed through the heavy doors on the street level and found himself in the library's lending room. There were long rows of stacks at the rear, and a charge desk near the entrance presided over by a single librarian. She looked up only briefly as Ken walked past her to the flight of stairs mounting against one wall.

The reading room on the second floor was larger than it had seemed from the street, and entirely occupied by heavy oak tables set parallel to each other down its entire length. But the half-dozen readers—all men—were clustered around the two tables nearest the front, where the light was best. Ken took a newspaper from the periodical rack as he went by, and sat down in one of two adjoining vacant chairs at the front table. He had only to look through the window, over the top of his paper, to see the Tobacco Mart across the square.

A few minutes later Sandy slid quietly into place beside him, shaking his head to indicate that he had seen nothing of interest while he kept guard below.

The three shabbily dressed men who shared their table glanced at them curiously, as if unaccustomed to seeing strange faces in that room, and then returned to their half-dozing perusal of magazines or newspapers.

The minute hand on a large wall clock crept slowly on its way. The big room was warm and quiet, shut off from the traffic noises below. The creaking of Sandy's

chair, as he shifted his weight on the hard seat, sounded loud in the silence.

At the end of half an hour the door of the Tobacco Mart still remained closed. No one had left or entered the shop.

Sandy shrugged, got up to exchange the photographic magazine he had been looking at for another one, and sat down again.

Another old man came in, glared at Ken as if he were occupying his own favorite chair, and settled himself noisily at the second table. His arrival was the only event that broke the peaceful monotony of the second half hour.

Finally Sandy pulled an envelope out of his pocket, and the stub of a pencil, and appeared to be making notes from an article in his magazine. But he held the envelope so that Ken could see what he had written.

"What do you think really goes on over there?" Sandy's scrawl read. "Is the Tobacco Mart an innocent place of business—or is it not? And if it is why did Watch Crystal behave so mysteriously?"

Ken shrugged his shoulders as a signal that he had no answers to Sandy's questions. They were the same questions he had been asking himself. He tilted his head in a gesture toward the street that asked, "Do you want to leave? Shall we give this up?"

Sandy grinned and shook his head slightly. "Why?" he scribbled on the envelope. "Always like to catch up on my reading during vacation. And I'm not hungry yet."

By the end of the next hour several of the room's other occupants had departed. The square outside was

beginning to fill with the first early shadows of winter darkness.

Suddenly Ken sat erect in his chair. An instant later he was getting to his feet, motioning Sandy to follow. But Sandy had already shut his magazine and stuffed his envelope and pencil back into his pocket.

They had both seen the boy who emerged from the Tobacco Mart and started briskly down the street, pushing a two-wheeled cart laden with packages.

"Delivery boy," Ken said, as the library door shut behind them and they hurried along the sidewalk in the same direction. "Maybe we can learn something from him."

The boy's destination was not far away. It proved to be—as Ken and Sandy had suspected—the nearest post office. The place was crowded at that hour of the day. The boy from the Tobacco Mart took his place at the end of a lengthy line waiting in front of the parcel-post window. The pile of packages he had brought with him was heaped at his feet, so that he could shove them along as the line moved up.

Ken got into place just behind him. "Quite a load you've got there," he said conversationally.

"That?" The boy touched the pile of packages with the toe of his shoe. His voice sounded contemptuous. "That's nothing. You should have seen what I had to lug around in the old days."

"Old days?" Ken repeated casually, as if he had no other interest than idle talk to pass the time. "Business better then?"

"The boss was better," the boy corrected him. "Fellow who used to own the business knew his stuff. But the

new owner—!" He shook his head in disgust. "Our line is smokers' supplies—tobacco and stuff, see? But sometimes I think he doesn't know the difference between a good Havana cigar and a—a cigar-store Indian."

Ken laughed what he hoped sounded like a sympathetic laugh. His mind was racing, busy with the interesting news that the Tobacco Mart had a new owner —a man who seemed to know nothing about tobacco. Sandy, behind him, gave him a poke in the ribs to indicate that he too had heard.

"Too bad," Ken said. "But I suppose it takes time to learn a new business, if it's been dumped in your lap unexpectedly—if you inherit it or something."

"He didn't inherit this." The boy moved his packages ahead with a small angry kick. "He bought it. And that's what I can't understand. Why? He doesn't lay in hardly any new stock. Sometimes he doesn't even bother to fill the orders that come in! So naturally not so many are coming any more. And I'm telling you we used to have orders from all over the country!"

Before Ken could ask him a new question he went on again. He seemed only too glad to talk to somebody who was willing to listen to his complaints.

"I've been working there for three years," he muttered, "after school and on Saturdays and all. But believe me, I'm thinking about quitting. At first I tried to help the guy out—give him a right steer once in a while when I saw he didn't know anything. But would he listen? Oh, no! According to him, he knows everything."

"Stubborn," Ken suggested, his tone still sympathetic.

"Stubborn *and* dumb," the boy added. "Finally I said to him the other day, "Look, Mr. Grace, why don't you rent out the second floor now that you don't need it for supplies any more?' It's empty, see? And it could just as well be rented, like the top floor is. But you know what he says? 'No, Pete,' he says to me, 'I like it this way—quiet. Tenants right over my head might be noisy.' Can you beat that? I know he's losing money on the business. He can't even be making expenses, the way he runs things. And here he won't even *try* to make a little extra money!"

"Sounds as if you could do a lot better for yourself somewhere else," Ken said.

"And, brother, I'm going to! Why that—!" The boy broke off as he suddenly became aware that he had reached the head of the line.

Ken and Sandy stayed where they were, hoping for further information about the mysterious new owner of the Tobacco Mart. But the boy was busy, conscientiously checking up on each package that he pushed through the window.

As the clerk handed him his change he said, "You're slipping, Pete. Used to ship out twice this amount—and once a day instead of once a week."

"You're telling me!" the boy answered, with his sour grin. "You should tell my genius boss—John D. Grace. The D is for dopey." He moved aside from the window. "Be seeing you!" He included Ken in his farewell gesture.

"Good luck!" Ken called after him.

"Lift your parcels up here, please," the clerk said impatiently.

Ken stared at him blankly. "Oh—eh—I just wanted some stamps, please. Two threes and—"

"Buddy," the clerk said, "can't you read? That sign in front of you says parcel post. If you want stamps—"

"Oh, sorry. Thanks." Ken departed hastily, with Sandy close behind him.

Out on the sidewalk again they headed instinctively back toward the Tobacco Mart. Pete, the delivery boy, was only half a block ahead of them, whistling dismally as he pushed his truck along the uneven sidewalk.

"Very interesting," Sandy murmured.

"Very interesting indeed," Ken agreed. "Do you suppose Grace is our friend Watch Crystal? Do you think—?"

He let the question die away. They had turned the corner into the block where the Tobacco Mart stood. The man they called Watch Crystal was visible at its door, peering impatiently out and down the street. When he saw Pete approaching he called to him.

"Hurry up! This is a rush order!" He was waving a small package, about the size of two cartons of cigarettes.

"O.K. I'm coming, Mr. Grace." There was more surprise than anything else in the boy's voice. "Somebody must want a smoke awful bad," he added as he drew near his employer.

Grace ignored his attempt at humor. "Take a taxi," he ordered. "And take one back here. You'll be bringing another package with you."

"Somebody returning their old cigar stubs?" Pete asked.

Grace snapped at him. "I don't pay you to ask idiotic

questions. Get going! The address is on the package."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Grace." Pete turned away, his eyes already ranging the busy square for a vacant taxi.

"There's one for us!" Sandy had sighted a cab that was just swinging around the corner behind him. He made a dive for it and Ken rushed after him.

"Just pull over to the curb and wait a minute," Sandy directed.

Ken strained his eyes in the growing dusk to keep Pete in sight. The boy was walking slowly on down the sidewalk, waving his arm occasionally when he thought he saw a taxi approaching.

The driver of the boys' car turned around in his seat, his eyes curious. "Playing games?"

"Playing games," Sandy agreed.

The driver shrugged. "It's all right with me. It's your dough that's ticking away on the clock."

"All right," Ken said a moment later. Pete had found a cab and climbed in. "Follow that taxi there." He pointed it out.

Ten minutes later the boys found themselves far downtown, less than a block from the East River. From inside their parked cab they could see Pete, half a block ahead, getting out of his cab and entering a small cigar store. The boy's taxi remained at the curb. In almost no time Pete reappeared, clutching a package about half the size of the one he had delivered.

"Back to the Tobacco Mart?" Sandy asked.

Ken thought quickly. Pete's taxi was already rolling off. "Let's not. We seem to be following a chain—first Barrack, then Grace, then Pete—and now this. Let's see what 'this' is."

"Good idea. How much?" Sandy asked their driver.

He was grinning as he joined Ken on the sidewalk a moment later. "Sounded to me as if the driver said, 'So long, Junior G-men.'"

"Well," Ken said, "maybe the laugh will turn out to be on us after all. But so long as we can pick up new links in the chain we might as well keep going."

"That reminds me." Sandy spoke through chattering teeth. "Link sausage makes a fine meal." But he moved steadily along beside Ken toward the little shop up ahead.

They approached it warily, but when they got close they saw that its windows were so steamed up that they were no longer transparent.

Ken's teeth were chattering, too. "Maybe we could go right in," he said. "At least it would be warm. And nobody in there would be likely to recognize us."

The wind from the river cut like ice.

"It's an idea," Sandy said. "Maybe they sell chocolate. Though right now I think I could even eat chewing tobacco."

Suddenly a shadow appeared against the steamy glass of the shop's door. The boys swung around and walked quickly into the entrance to a shop two doors away. Feeling safe in the darkness, Ken poked his head out far enough to see.

The broad-shouldered man who came out of the small cigar store was wearing a pea jacket. A knitted stocking cap perched high on the round head above his short bull neck.

He walked toward the boys and passed within a few yards of them.

"He's got it," Sandy said quietly.

"One more link," Ken murmured. "Come on."

The package held tightly under the man's arm appeared to be the same one Pete had delivered a few minutes before.

The boys moved out after him as he walked on into the night.

CHAPTER X

NOTHING TO SNEEZE AT

THE MAN IN THE PEA JACKET led them southward along South Street. On their right stood the long row of buildings occupied by wholesale sea-food merchants—identifiable now even in the darkness by an almost overpowering smell of fish. Across the street, on their left, were the great sheds and docks that extended out over the East River itself. Sometimes, beyond them, the black bow of a freighter could be seen looming up against the gray-black sky.

They passed the huge Fulton Fish Market, where only a few lights twinkled now in the vast empty spaces that would swarm with activity when the early-morning deliveries began.

The man ahead of them walked at a steady pace, hands deep in his pockets, the collar of his pea jacket turned up high around his ears. He seemed in no hurry to get inside out of the cold.

"Wow!" Ken said softly, as a sudden bitter gust of wind straight off the icy river almost drove them back against the building they were passing. "If this turns

out to be a wild-goose chase—if he's just a sailor on the way back to his ship with a couple of cartons of cigarettes—"

"Stop!" Sandy told him. "There's got to be some good reason for us going through all this."

"There ought to be," Ken agreed grimly.

His eyes were watering from the wind. He rubbed his gloved hands across them, clearing his blurred vision in time to see the man they were following veer across the street on a long diagonal. Suddenly he vanished around the corner of a ramshackle building built directly on the river. The boys speeded up.

"Easy," Ken said, when they reached the building.

Just beyond it the sidewalk was edged by a tall fence of corrugated iron, but between the building and the beginning of the fence was an opening.

"He went through here," Ken said, as they approached it. He peered around the edge of the building and saw that the fence walled off a great cement-floored dock, stretching into the river some five hundred feet.

At its far end glowed a single light, which faintly silhouetted the figure of the man in the pea jacket, still moving steadily away from them.

The boys slipped through the opening after him.

"Keep against the wall," Ken said.

They moved quietly forward, in the deep shadowy protection of the building that bordered the dock for its first hundred feet or so. Beyond the building, in the open water that surrounded the rest of the great pier, the boys could discern a row of moored boats, the stern of one snubbed against the bow of the next.

"Fishing boats," Sandy murmured. "But they wouldn't be going out this early in the evening, would they? He wouldn't be reporting to work now if—"

He broke off as the man, up ahead, swung toward the opposite side of the long pier.

For the first time the boys saw that there were craft moored there too. It was too dark to make them out clearly, but they were obviously much larger than the fishing boats.

"Barges?" Sandy whispered questioningly.

They flattened themselves against the wall of the building, near its riverward end, to see what the man would do. When he reached the edge of the dock he seemed to wait a minute, perhaps peering around to see if he was alone. And then they could see his shadowy shape mounting what must have been a ladder against the craft's side.

A moment later there was the sound of a door creaking open and shut, and then a weak yellow light appeared some distance above the water. It flickered, dimmed, and then brightened again.

"It's a barge all right. He's gone into the cabin," Ken said. "Let's go take a look."

They hurried across the windswept dock into the partial shelter of the craft moored on the opposite side.

There were three barges, all of them large and each supplied with a small cabin aft. But only the cabin of the barge nearest the shore—the one the man had entered—seemed occupied. The barges were moored end to end, the flat stern of the first one backed up against the shore. Its heavy timber bulwarks rose some six feet above the level of the dock, and the boys could dimly

make out the rough curve of its piled cargo rising even higher. It seemed to be coal or stone. At the aft end they found the ladder the man had mounted.

Their feet were almost silent on the concrete of the pier's floor, but the wind was noisy enough to have covered any accidental sounds they might have made as they walked on down toward the end of the dock.

"Nobody aboard either of the others," Sandy said.

"Doesn't seem to be," Ken agreed. "Let's climb aboard the middle one. Maybe from there we can see what's going on in our friend's cabin."

Sandy hesitated only for an instant. "I don't suppose we have any right to be doing it," he said. "But come on. Let's go."

Ken scrambled up the ladder of the middle barge. He paused when his head was level with the top.

"O.K.," he whispered down to Sandy below him. "All clear."

Ken was standing in the protection of the barge cabin's aft wall when Sandy joined him.

The cabin occupied about two-thirds of the barge's twenty-five-foot width, leaving a passageway only a few feet wide on either side, between the cabin wall and the bulwark that dropped sheer to the water line. The faint glow from the lights on the street disclosed that the ten-foot space aft of it was mostly open deck, cluttered with heavy coiled lines. To one side a small shed was attached and a sizable bin filled with large lumps of soft coal. Forward of the cabin was the cargo hold, heaped high with crushed stone.

They looked down toward the lighted cabin of the next barge, nearly a hundred feet away. Its hold also

was loaded with stone. The single window in the cabin's forward wall was small and partially covered by curtains.

"We certainly can't see anything from here," Sandy said disgustedly.

"I was afraid we couldn't," Ken admitted. "If we want to find out what's in that package, we'll have to get closer."

They moved reluctantly aft, away from the wall's protection, until they were standing at the gunwale. Four feet of black space separated them from the other barge.

"It's an easy jump," Ken muttered.

"Sure," Sandy agreed. They couldn't see the water, swirling and eddying below, but they could hear it sucking and gurgling against the hulls of the barges. "But I'd hate to miss it. If we fell down between these two tubs—"

"We won't miss it," Ken assured him.

He leaped lightly across the expanse of treacherous water. For an instant, as he landed on the far side, he waved his arms to maintain his balance on the eighteen-inch-wide timber that formed the barge's bulwark. Then he steadied himself and reached a hand back toward Sandy.

"O.K.?" he asked, as the other landed beside him.

Sandy sighed with relief. "O.K."

They stood there for a moment, considering the best way to get forward toward the cabin.

There was clearly only one route to take. It would be impossible to cross the mound of stone in the hold without causing a clatter that would reveal their pres-

ence. They would have to walk around the edge of the barge, along the narrow bulwark.

Ken started toward the left—the side of the barge away from the dock. As soon as he reached the corner and moved carefully around it, to start aft, the wind caught him so fiercely that he had to drop to his knees to keep from being blown off his feet.

He felt Sandy drop down behind him a moment later.

The vicious gust blew itself out shortly, but not until both boys were stiff from holding that huddled position in the freezing air.

"Come on." Ken barely breathed the words as he got slowly to his feet and started aft again.

There were other gusts after that, not quite so fierce as the first one, but strong enough so that Ken could feel himself tottering toward the sharp-edged pile of stone on his right. And when he leaned his weight against the wind, to steady himself, the black water below seemed to rise toward him, its oily surface glinting with menace.

Halfway along the length of the barge they had to rest, lowering themselves to their knees again and grasping at the splintery timbers with numb hands. The lighted window they were heading for still seemed a long distance away.

When they finally reached the small aft deck, and dropped down from their hazardous perch, they huddled together for a minute. Both of them were shaking, partly from cold, partly from the nervous tension of their precarious journey.

But as soon as Ken could breath evenly again he

started toward the cabin, feeling Sandy behind him. He headed toward the rear corner of the little structure. There was a window in the back wall, too, as he could see, and on that side they would be protected from the worst of the wind.

Bracing himself lightly against the cabin wall for support, he raised himself upright from a crouched position, until he could peer through the narrow slit between the imperfectly drawn dark curtains. When Sandy rose up beside him he shifted slightly to make room for him. Then they turned and looked at each other in the faint light that came through the slit.

"And we risked our necks to see that!" Sandy breathed.

Ken had no answer.

He didn't know what he had expected to see inside the cabin, but certainly he had anticipated something more dramatic than the scene that showed itself there.

The interior of the tiny room was snug and pleasant. In the light of an oil lamp, hung on an old-fashioned wall bracket, the room glowed warmly.

"Like a picture on a calendar," Ken thought to himself with anger and amazement.

The man they had followed was no longer wearing his pea jacket or his cap. In a heavy turtle-necked sweater he sat at ease in front of a small, round coal stove. There was a white mug in his hands, and he was in the act of tipping his head back to drain the last swallow from it. Then he leaned forward toward the stove, refilled his cup from a white enameled coffeepot, and settled back again.

His feet were propped on the rim of the sand-filled

box in which the stove stood, while his whole big body relaxed in warmth and comfort. As they watched he reached toward a paper bag on a gleaming oilcloth-covered table and pulled out a fat doughnut.

The boys could only see his back, but even the thick folds of his neck seemed to wrinkle with pleasure as he dunked the doughnut in the coffee and carried the dripping object to his mouth.

"Let's get out of here," Sandy muttered. "This is killing me."

"Wait a minute." Ken craned his neck, trying for a new angle of vision through the narrow slit. Finally he spotted what he had been looking for. The package the man had brought from the cigar store lay, still unopened, on one of the bunks against the port bulkhead.

"I'd certainly like to know what's in that thing," Ken whispered.

"I'll go in and ask him," Sandy offered. "Maybe he'll give me a cup of coffee and a doughnut while I'm there. Even if he slit my throat afterward," he added, "it would almost be worth it."

The man had finished the doughnut. He took his feet off the box rim and let his chair come down on its front legs with a thump. Still holding his coffee mug in one hand, he reached for a poker with the other, shoved aside the stove lid and shook down the fire.

A shower of brilliant sparks flew out of the chimney above the boys' heads, immediately followed by a burst of thick acrid black smoke. The wind twisted it down onto them in a choking cloud.

They buried their faces in their arms, trying to protect themselves against the cabin wall.

Ken choked back a cough, his head pounding with the effort. Then he felt Sandy, close beside him, heave convulsively in the first stages of a vast sneeze.

Sandy's head jerked back, his mouth uncontrollably open.

Ken clamped a swift hand over it. "Quiet!" he begged, in a frenzied whisper.

Sandy made a final effort. The sneeze came, but only as a slight snort muffled by the whipping wind. The thunderous noise Ken had dreaded didn't occur.

"O.K." Sandy straightened. "I'm all right now. But let's move, huh?"

"Might as well," Ken agreed reluctantly.

He was convinced that the package lying in there on the bunk contained something far more significant than two cartons of cigarettes. But he had no proof for his belief, and he could think of no way of finding such proof.

"Back the way we came?" Sandy's whisper was definitely unenthusiastic.

Ken took one last glance through the window. The man was seated in his chair again, the coffee mug beside him on the table now and a newspaper spread wide in his hands. He had the air of a man who has settled down for a long quiet evening.

Ken shook himself impatiently. There was certainly no reason for them to remain here longer.

He realized that he hadn't answered Sandy's last question. He didn't want to return the way they had come any more than Sandy did. And the ladder leading down from the barge they were on was less than twenty feet away.

He jerked his head toward it. "Let's take a chance and use this one."

Sandy nodded his agreement.

They walked carefully toward it across the deck, sliding their feet in the darkness to avoid the possibility of stepping down on something that might upset their balance.

They had covered only half the distance to the ladder when they both started and froze where they stood.

A car had swept onto the dock, through the same opening in the fence which they had used earlier. It swerved to the right after it had gone only a few feet, and its headlights illuminated the barge in a wash of light.

With a single motion the boys dropped flat on the deck.

Somewhere below them the car stopped. The buzz of its engine was cut off and the lights disappeared.

Ken touched Sandy's arm. "Get back."

If the driver of the car came aboard the barge, they would certainly be discovered where they lay. And it was too late to use the barge ladder now. They might walk directly into the arms of whoever had just driven up on the dock below.

Slithering along the deck like eels, they went back the way they had just come, and on past the cabin window to take shelter behind the cabin's far wall, in the narrow space between it and the bulwark.

As soon as they stopped moving they could hear sounds. Somebody was climbing the ladder. There was a dull thud as the new arrival jumped down onto the deck of the barge.

From inside the cabin there was a metallic banging, and suddenly once more the boys were enveloped in a cloud of choking smoke.

Sandy had learned his lesson. He jerked down the zipper of his windbreaker and ducked his head inside at the first whiff.

Ken, who had been concentrating on the sounds around the corner of the cabin, was caught completely unprepared. He had inhaled a lungful of smoke before he realized it. His shoulders began to heave as Sandy's had done a few minutes before.

Ken held his breath. He pinched his nose tightly between thumb and finger. But the sneeze pushed harder than ever at the back of his throat.

Even through the buzzing in his ears he could hear the knock at the cabin door and the voice that said, "Open up, Cal. It's me."

Ken gasped. He felt as if his eyes were about to pop out of his head. The urge to sneeze was irresistible.

"Coming," the man inside the cabin answered, and the stove lid clattered back on the stove.

There was nothing Ken could do about it. He sneezed. His whole body seemed to erupt in one vast explosion, loud enough—it seemed to him—to wake the dead.

There was a clang inside the cabin and pounding footsteps across the deck outside.

Before Ken and Sandy could even scramble to their feet an overcoated figure loomed above them at the corner of the cabin wall. Even in the faint light from the window he was recognizable, although he apparently was still unable to see in the darkness.

It was the man they knew as Barrack. His eyes were slitted in an effort to penetrate the black shadow thrown by the cabin wall.

"Who's there?" It was not the affable voice he had used the night before when he had called so inexplicably at Richard Holt's apartment. It was a curt, furious snarl.

The boys held themselves motionless. The slightest gesture would give away their whereabouts.

Then Barrack, who had been fumbling in his pocket, drew out a torch and flicked it on. Ken and Sandy, spotlighted in the brilliant glare, instinctively shut their eyes against it.

For a long moment none of them stirred.

Then Barrack spoke in a voice of controlled fury. "What are *you* two doing here?"

Ken opened his eyes a fraction of an inch into the bright white light. It was enough to show him the gun that Barrack was holding leveled at their heads.

CHAPTER XI

A SCHEME FOR ATTACK

BARRACK kept his pistol pointed at them. "Call!" he shouted.

Inside the cabin there was a crash.

Ken could visualize what had happened. The big man in the turtle-neck sweater, hurrying toward the door, had apparently knocked down a chair in the crowded little room.

For an instant Barrack's eyes shifted toward the cabin doorway.

Sandy moved before the man's glance had refocused. Like a steel spring uncoiling, his six feet straightened out—one shoulder forward, aimed for Barrack's midriff.

Ken leaped forward too, only a fraction of a second behind him. He chopped at the hand that held the gun just as Sandy's shoulder made contact.

The gun flew wide over the side of the barge. Barrack almost followed it, under the impact of two hundred pounds of well-conditioned muscle.

Almost before Barrack landed heavily against the bulwark, the boys had spun around and were tearing

across the deck toward the ladder. The man named Cal emerged through the cabin doorway just as they charged past. He never had a chance to stop them. He hadn't even raised his fist when Ken struck him a glancing blow that threw him backward.

The boys didn't attempt to find the actual location of the ladder in the darkness. They vaulted straight over the bulwark, side by side, and landed on the concrete pier six feet below with bone-jarring thuds.

But both of them were on their feet an instant later and pounding toward the street, the shouts behind them echoing in their ears.

They reached the opening in the fence just as they heard the engine of Barrack's car roar into life.

Ken glanced briefly back over his shoulder. Barrack had parked the car with its nose pointed toward the barge. He would have to back up and swing around.

Sandy was glancing quickly up and down the dark deserted street.

"There's a diner down there!" he panted. The glow of neon lighting he was pointing to was at least three blocks away, but it seemed to be the only haven in sight.

They had covered less than a block when Barrack's car emerged from the pier. It paused there briefly. The driver was apparently looking to see which way they had gone. And then, apparently, he sighted them. The car swung in their direction, its tires screaming.

"We'll never make it!" Sandy gasped.

Ken's eyes caught a flash of light on the opposite side of the street. He turned his head toward it without breaking his stride. "Look!"

A taxi was entering South Street from the cross street just ahead and slowing to a stop at the corner. As the two sailors in the back seat climbed out, Ken and Sandy were already tearing across toward it. Barrack's headlights were close enough to outline them clearly.

"Hey!" Sandy yelled as they ran. "Cab!"

The driver waved a casual hand to let them know he saw them coming.

Ken tumbled inside just as Barrack's car shot past. Sandy piled in on top of him. The driver, only mildly surprised at their haste, said, "In a hurry, huh?"

Ken watched Barrack brake to a stop just ahead of the taxi.

"Not particularly—not any more," Ken managed to answer. "Take us uptown to Radio City, please."

The cab swung in a wide U turn and headed north. Ken and Sandy slumped wearily back on the seat. For a moment they had all they could do to catch their breath.

"We messed that up for fair," Sandy said finally, still gulping for air.

"I messed it up," Ken said. "Me and my big sneeze."

"Say, bud"—the driver pivoted his head to speak to them—"is that joker behind us a friend of yours?"

Ken sat up and swung around to look through the rear window. A pair of headlights were close behind them.

"Not that I know of," Ken said. "Why?"

"That's the car that stopped just ahead of me as you got in," the driver explained. "He made a U turn, just like I did, and he's been on our tail ever since. Thought maybe he was trying to catch up with you."

Ken and Sandy looked at each other in the glow of a street light they were passing.

"He's no friend of ours," Ken said decisively.

"You don't mind if I try to lose him then?" the driver asked. "I hate a fellow that nudges my rear end like that."

"It's O.K. with us," Sandy assured him. "Go right ahead."

"I don't like this," Ken muttered. He kept one eye on the rear window. "Here he comes."

"I don't like it, either," Sandy agreed. "He probably would have used that gun, but fortunately we didn't get a chance to find out."

"If anybody asked him, of course," Ken said, "he'd undoubtedly say he was just protecting private property from trespassers—and there's no doubt that's what we were."

"Sure," Sandy said. He was rubbing absent-mindedly at the knee he had landed on when he dove off the barge. "But the way he had that gun ready—" He shook his head. "There must be a bigger danger of trespassers around stone-loaded barges than I thought."

"Maybe that's not plain stone—maybe it's gold ore," Ken suggested flippantly, but his eyes glued to the back window were still grim. Barrack's car had followed them skillfully around two more corners.

"Oh, indubitably." Sandy's tone matched Ken's. "Or platinum ore. And now explain why it was Barrack who had the gun, instead of—what did he call him?—Cal. And what Barrack was doing there in the first place."

Their cab, driving up lower Broadway now—a de-

serted canyon at that hour of the evening—stopped for a red light. The car behind stopped too.

"I think I'll get out and give that guy back there a poke in the snoot," the driver of the cab said. His hand was already on the door handle. "His lights are driving me nuts."

Ken spoke quickly. "Wait until we get out. We're in a hurry."

"Well—O.K." The driver sighed as he settled back behind his wheel. "Maybe by then I'll have my temper under control. *I* know I shouldn't always be wanting to give a guy a punch in the snoot. It's just my impulsive nature."

Ken and Sandy laughed in spite of themselves.

"I know just how you feel," Sandy assured the man in the front seat. "I have the same trouble myself." But the laughter was out of his voice before he stopped speaking. There was a menacing quality in the persistence of those lights behind them.

As they neared Fourteenth Street the traffic began to get heavier. Soon the cab driver was able to swing in and out of the lanes of cars in a series of swift maneuvers that forced Barrack's car to drop behind.

"That'll hold him," the driver said with satisfaction. "He's pocketed now!"

"But something tells me he won't stay pocketed," Sandy murmured. "Even if we really lose him he could catch up with us later at your father's apartment."

"And if he arrives there, complete with gun, to ask what we were doing on the barge," Ken said, "what do we tell him? That we were just out for a moonlight stroll along the river?"

"We ask him what *he* was doing there."

"And of course he'd tell us," Ken said sarcastically.

"Of course." Sandy laughed shortly. "Everything about him so far has been absolutely straightforward—the way he came to your father's apartment, the way he told us he didn't know Grace, the way he left that package for Grace to pick up—" He broke off angrily. "I'm certainly beginning to be mighty curious about that man. But I don't see how we can learn much more about him, now that he's got us spotted. If we turn up in his way again—"

"I've got an idea!" Ken leaned forward to speak to the driver. "We changed our minds. Take us to the Pennsylvania Station instead."

"What? Penn Station?" The driver glanced around in surprise. "But I thought you were in such a hurry to get to Radio City."

"Yes, we were," Ken said. "But—"

"You have to humor him," Sandy explained to the back of the man's head. "It's his impulsive nature."

"Oh. Sure. In that case. Anything your little heart desires."

The cab swung left on Twenty-ninth Street and sped westward toward Seventh Avenue. There it turned right for the big railroad station a few blocks northward. It was difficult to be certain, in these busy streets, but Ken thought he spotted Barrack's car half a block behind.

"What's your idea?" Sandy asked.

"You gave it to me," Ken answered. "We're going to make Barrack think we *won't* turn up in his way again."

The cab swung down into the ramp that led directly

into the terminal. Ken paid the driver, thanked him, and then led Sandy through the door into the station.

"Let's wait here a minute," he said, just inside.

"What for?"

"Our shadow. We don't want to lose him."

"But I thought—!"

"Here he comes."

Barrack's car was pulling up to the same spot their taxi had left only a few seconds before. The man in the turtle-neck sweater, wearing his pea jacket again—apparently he hadn't had time to stop for his cap—jumped out of the front seat. Then Barrack, at the wheel, drove the car away.

"Let's go." Ken took Sandy's arm and moved casually forward. "I'm glad we've got Cal instead of Barrack. From the way he banged around in that cabin tonight, I don't think he's very quick on his feet."

"It certainly would be nice," Sandy said, "if I knew what you had in that alleged mind of yours."

Ken glanced over his shoulder. "Good," he murmured. "He's only about fifty feet behind. Everything's proceeding according to plan." He steered Sandy toward the Information Desk. "When is the next train to Brentwood?" he asked in a clear voice.

"Brentwood? Just a minute." The information clerk consulted a schedule. "Eight one. On Track Ten."

"Thank you," Ken said. "Might as well get our tickets now," he added to Sandy.

At the ticket window, Ken spoke loudly and clearly. Their shadow, partly concealed by a mountainous heap of luggage, was only a few feet away.

As Ken tucked the two one-way tickets to Brentwood

into his pocket he said, glancing at his watch, "We've got just an hour. How about something to eat?"

"That's the first sensible thing you've said in the last ten minutes," Sandy muttered under his breath. He pulled out his wallet and counted the money in it. "Not quite six dollars," he announced. "How much have you got with you?"

Ken checked. "Eight dollars and some change."

"All right. I'll take command of this phase of the action. Ever since I saw our friend there eating that doughnut and drinking that hot coffee—while we were freezing out in the cold—I've wanted to pay him back. And I know just the way to do it."

They both still felt stiff and bruised from their leap to the dock, but the comparative warmth of the cab and the greater warmth of the station had thawed them slightly. They walked almost briskly toward the largest of the station's many restaurants. Sandy led the way inside and chose a table in full view of anyone standing outside the big window overlooking the busy arcade.

Ken, shielding himself behind a large menu, stole a look through the glass. "He's there."

"Good." Sandy grinned. "He's going to love this. I could tell from the way he was eating in the cabin that he really enjoys his food." He looked up at a waiter who had hurried to their table. "We'll start with clams on the half shell," he said. "Then soup—onion, I guess. And then a sirloin for two—very rare. With it we'd better have some . . ."

When the waiter headed for the kitchen a few minutes later he had a slightly glazed expression on his face.

"I take it we're not really going back to Brentwood," Sandy said over the clams. "That act of buying the tickets in a loud voice was just an act?"

Ken looked at him innocently. "Of course we *could* go back tonight—but then we'd miss the basketball game."

Sandy lifted an eyebrow at him. "I see. And what else would we miss?"

Ken shrugged. "I don't know," he admitted. "All I really had in mind was convincing them that we were clearing out of town—going home to Brentwood and our own business. I thought it would calm their suspicions."

"By 'them' you mean Barrack and our boy Cal out there?" Sandy glanced through the window for an instant. "He's drooling!" he announced happily.

"Barrack and Cal," Ken agreed. "Grace too. I'm assuming they're all tied in together in something."

"I think that's pretty obvious," Sandy said. "But in what? What kind of game are they playing—skulking all over town that way, mysteriously transferring packages from one person to another? And apparently ruining what used to be a perfectly good wholesale tobacco business?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Ken said. He waited while cups of steaming soup were substituted for the plates of empty clamshells. "The only explanation that occurs to me," he said quietly, "is that Grace is a fence —a receiver and distributor of stolen goods. It would explain his lack of interest in the tobacco business."

Sandy considered the suggestion, his eyes slowly brightening. "I think you're right. Then Barrack is

probably a thief. That's why he had to be so careful about transmitting that package to Grace."

Ken nodded. "And maybe Grace uses Cal, on the barge, for transportation. Cal could get the stuff out of New York."

Sandy stopped with a spoonful of soup halfway to his mouth. "But then what was Barrack doing on the barge? If he's afraid to have any open contact with Grace, why wouldn't he also be afraid to show himself around the barge?"

Ken thought for a long moment and then shook his head. "I give up. I can't think of any explanation for that—unless he's trying to cross Grace up some way." He frowned down into his soup. "I wish we'd had a chance to learn more about the Tobacco Mart when we were down there this afternoon. I can't help but feel that that's the center of whatever's going on."

Sandy filled in the brief wait between the soup and the steak with a thick piece of French bread, lavishly buttered. "It's certainly too bad," he said, "that we don't know just a little more about at least one of those characters. Then maybe we could go to the police."

"There's certainly nothing we could tell the police now," Ken said. "Of course, if we hung around the Tobacco Mart again tonight—after we'd convinced our friend out there that we'd gone meekly off to Brentwood—we *might* find something interesting.

Sandy's glare cut him off. "That is the kind of suggestion," he said loftily, "that has, in the past, landed us in some unpleasant situations."

Ken grinned. "That's right. And also, quite often, into some pretty exciting yarns. For which we have earned

a reputation. Not to mention," he added, "sizable checks."

"Money is not everything," Sandy informed him. "And reputation is not everything, either."

"I'll toss you for it," Ken said, pulling a quarter out of his pocket. "Heads, we make one more quick survey of the Tobacco Mart tonight. Tails, we forget the whole business."

Sandy was still maintaining his air of firm disinterest. "You are taking advantage of my well-known sportsman's instinct," he said. "I cannot refuse to toss you for it, but I insist upon going on record as opposed to the whole idea."

Ken handed him the coin. Sandy flicked it up in the air with his thumb and watched it as it fell to the table.

"Tails it is," Ken announced. "All right, we forget the whole business." He attacked his steak. "This is certainly good, isn't it?" he remarked conversationally.

"How can you eat at a time like this?" Sandy demanded. "Aren't you interested in the outcome of the coin tossing?" And when Ken looked up at him, with an air of puzzlement, Sandy added, "I thought it was understood that I would toss for two out of three."

"Oh." Ken grinned. "Was it?"

"Certainly." Sandy tossed the coin again. "Heads," he announced.

He tossed it the third time. "Heads again," he said.

With a heavy mock sigh he handed the quarter back to Ken. "Your impulsive nature has again overcome my good judgment," he said. "You have forced me to agree to accompany you on a safari to the Tobacco Mart."

CHAPTER XII

CORNERED

AT SEVEN FIFTY-SEVEN, four minutes before the Brentwood train was due to depart, the boys left the restaurant and sauntered down to the head of the stairway leading to Track Ten. At exactly eight o'clock they walked down the stairs, stopping at the bottom to make sure they were still being followed.

"All aboard!" the conductor was calling. "All aboard!"

The boys entered the car nearest them and began to walk toward the front of the train. Through the windows they caught a glimpse of Cal, keeping pace with them along the platform.

As they entered the next car there was a slight lurch, and then another. The train was starting to move. The boys sank down into an empty seat.

An instant later Ken leaped up. "O.K. We've left him. Come on." He ran toward the forward end of the car with Sandy close at his heels. The trainman was just closing the door when they reached him.

"Wrong train!" Ken gasped, pushing past him. He leaped to the platform and ducked immediately

behind a baggage truck piled high with mailbags. Sandy joined him there.

They let the last car of the train rumble past before they risked a look.

The man in the pea jacket had already turned his back on them and was walking toward the stairway.

"We'll take the other stairs back there," Ken said. "Keep behind the pillars."

They reached the upper level before Cal did, in time to watch him cross the waiting room and take the escalator to the Seventh Avenue exit.

"He doesn't know much about Penn Station," Ken murmured. "Come on. We'll get a cab before he does."

He ducked down a short flight of steps to an intermediate level and ran for the taxicab stand. Less than a minute later they were once more leaning back against leather cushions and Sandy was saying, for the second time that day, "Chatham Square—as fast as you can get there."

Twenty minutes afterward they were crouched down in a narrow passageway between two buildings, a few doors down the street from the Tobacco Mart. They waited nearly five minutes before a cab drew up before the shop's darkened windows, and Cal darted out of it across the sidewalk.

His heavy knock on the door sounded above the roar of the departing taxi's motor. They could even hear his voice saying, "It's me—Cal."

The door of the Tobacco Mart opened, Cal disappeared inside, and the door closed again.

"Now?" Sandy asked.

"I'll just take a look around first." Ken sidled out of

the alleyway and stood in the shadows. There were few people on the street. The Chinese Theater across the square was still lighted up, and the library was still open. But the immediate vicinity of the Tobacco Mart was quiet.

"Let's go," Ken murmured.

They approached the Tobacco Mart and slipped quickly past it. The front part of the shop was entirely dark, but a dim light seemed to show somewhere in the rear, as if from behind a partition.

Ken stopped at a narrow door just beyond the shop and gave it a tentative push. It moved inward with a slight creak. He pushed it half open and peered inside.

"Come on." Ken couldn't keep the triumph out of his voice. He had noticed the door that afternoon, from his post in the library, and had guessed—after his conversation with the delivery boy—that it led to the floors above the Tobacco Mart. Apparently it was left unlocked for the convenience of the third-floor tenant.

On the far side of the door, which they closed carefully after they had slipped through it, they found themselves in a musty hallway. By the street glow which faintly penetrated the grimy pane they could see two mailboxes set into the wall. The door of one hung open on a broken hinge.

Ken risked a quick flash from his pencil flashlight. It revealed a flight of stairs that mounted upward against the left wall. Ken put a cautious foot on the first tread and let it take his weight. There was only a single creak —a faint one. Walking close to the wall, to minimize the possibility of other creaks, Ken led the way to the top.

A door, presumably leading to the empty second-floor apartment above the shop, was to their right. It had no lock. Ken's flash showed a gaping round hole where the hardware had once been. He turned the flash off.

He waited a moment, listening. The silence was complete. Then he pushed the door open, looked into the empty room beyond, and led the way in.

They seemed to be in the center room of a three-room flat. An archway separated it from the room overlooking the street—a room faintly lighted by a glow through unwashed windows. A narrower open doorway separated it from the rear room.

Ken remembered the dim light that they had seen at the rear of the Tobacco Mart. He turned toward the rear room of the second-floor apartment.

"Easy," he whispered. Sandy, behind him, needed no warning. He edged his feet forward as cautiously as if he were stalking a deer in the silent woods.

At the doorway that opened into the rear room they paused, a pair of silent shadows.

Suddenly Ken grabbed Sandy's hand and pointed it at the thing he saw—a six-inch ragged round hole in the floor against one wall. Light came up through it, like a column of dim dust-filled smoke. And also, faintly through the opening, drifted the mumble of voices.

They were on the threshold of what must once have been a kitchen, Ken thought. And the hole in the floor had once given passage to a drain pipe.

Hardly daring to believe in their luck, he began to move carefully toward the upward-shining ray of light. Sandy edged along beside him.

They progressed scarcely an inch at a time, aware that they might be heard at any moment by the occupants of the room just under their feet. It took long minutes to cross the floor. But the voices below grew more distinct with every step they took. Before they reached their goal they had both identified the three voices taking part in the conversation below.

The boys had heard them all before. They were the voices of Barrack, Grace, and Cal.

The first full sentence they heard distinctly was spoken by Cal.

"But they went back home—to that town called Brentwood," Cal said. "I tell you I saw them get on the train, and I saw the train pull out. So what is there to worry about?"

"I know what you told us." Grace's voice, which had been so diffident and polite that day in Sam Morris's jewelry store, now had a startling note of authority and command. "But nobody can tell us what they're going to do when they get there. Are they going to take their little story to the cops?"

"What story could they take?" Barrack demanded. "They'd be fools to report that they had a gun pointed at them on the barge tonight. Cal here could vouch that they'd been trespassing. Cops would laugh at them."

"Cops might not laugh if the kids said it was you who had the gun," Grace pointed out sharply.

"Cal would have to say they were mistaken, that's all," Barrack said. "I don't know what you're worrying about."

There was a moment's silence. Ken, in the process of

lowering himself to his knees in order to look through the hole, held his body completely still.

"I'm worrying," Grace said finally, "because they turned up there at all. They saw you last night. They'd seen me in that little jerkwater jewelry store. But how'd they happen on the barge? If you can't give me a good answer to that, I think we ought to clear everything out of this location immediately. How do we know they haven't already connected one of us with this place too?"

"Be reasonable," Barrack said. "They're just kids. They're not geniuses from the F.B.I."

"Anyway, you don't have to worry about my end of it," Cal said cheerfully. "I'm taking care of that tonight. If you just keep this stuff undercover for a while, nobody can prove anything on any of us."

"Maybe so," Grace said. "But what's the good of producing this stuff if we can't distribute it?"

Ken was finally on his knees, his hands on either side of the hole. He brought his eye into line with the opening just as Grace asked his question.

The three men were seated around a table in the room below. Their faces were in shadow but a light bulb dangling from a cord illuminated the table's surface.

Ken stifled a gasp. All over the table, like a scattered pack of large cards, lay crisp fresh ten-dollar bills.

Counterfeiters! The word sounded so loud in his mind that for an instant Ken was afraid he had shouted it. Swiftly he tugged Sandy down to join him.

"This is good stuff," Grace was saying. "And I'm not going to let anything jeopardize our chances to make a

real killing with it. Believe me, it would take an expert to tell them from the real thing." He brought one of the bills close to his eye to study it.

Sandy, upright on his knees again, pulled his tiny new camera out of his pocket. He held it in the column of light for Ken to see, and Ken nodded vehemently.

A photograph of the men around that money-laden table ought to be enough to send every Treasury agent in the country to Chatham Square.

Then Ken saw that Sandy was rising carefully to his feet. For a moment he was puzzled. Dimly he saw Sandy gesture toward the outer room, and finally Ken understood him. Sandy had to adjust his camera before it would be ready for use, and realized they didn't dare use Ken's flashlight so close to the hole. Some slight reflection might be caught downstairs.

They made their way back as far as the doorway with the same caution they had used crossing the room earlier. Ken's hands were shaking a little by the time he was holding his light for Sandy, and the redhead seemed to be having some slight difficulty making the delicate adjustments on his small camera. They could no longer hear what the men below were saying. It was impossible to know what evidence they were missing. But if Sandy could get his picture that would furnish all the evidence they needed.

And they might be seriously in need of evidence—especially if the men did decide, as Grace had suggested, to clear everything out of their present location. If they managed to accomplish that immediately, the story Ken and Sandy could tell would seem to have little basis in fact.

Finally the boys were again creeping back to the hole and Sandy was lowering himself carefully over it, until he lay flat on the floor with the camera to his eye.

Ken was close enough so that he could hear the conversation below quite clearly again. Some decision seemed to have been reached.

"All right," Grace was saying, "then your end will be O.K., Cal. I don't think anybody could ever trace your purchase of the paper, Barrack. And all we've got on hand went to the barge tonight. So when I get rid of this stuff we'll be ready for any temporary trouble those kids can make."

"You're sure the ink can't be traced?" Cal asked.

"Not a chance," Barrack said firmly. "I ordered it when I sent in the regular order for the print shop."

Carefully the boys began to edge back, away from the hole. Ken was already trying to organize in his mind the story he would tell the moment he could get to a phone. The first important thing to impress on the authorities would be—

A dull pounding from downstairs broke in on his train of thought. It was a moment before he realized that someone must be knocking on the Tobacco Mart's front door.

"Who could that be?" Barrack's voice betrayed his tenseness.

"You jumped like an old woman," Grace said. "Just stay quiet in here. I'll see." Footsteps moved quickly over the floor, and a door opened.

The moment the door shut again a hoarse cracked voice said, "I came to tell you—there's somebody upstairs. I saw a light!"

"What?" Grace almost shouted it. Then he seemed to pull himself together. "That's impossible. We've been right here. We'd have heard if—What kind of a light?"

"Just a little dim flickery kind of thing. The library was just closin' up and they were tellin' me I had to get out. But I swear I saw somethin'—quite a ways back from the windows."

There was a moment of paralyzed silence.

Upstairs, in the musty darkness, Ken and Sandy were as staggered by the newcomer's announcement as were the men below.

Grace's authoritative voice broke the stillness.

"Barrack, you come with me upstairs! Get that gun out of the drawer there. You get back outside, Andy—and keep your eyes open. Cal, you take the back yard."

Ken's mind had begun to work again too.

There was no longer time to retreat by the stairs they had come up. They would run into Barrack and Grace before they reached the sidewalk.

Ken flashed his light toward the rear windows of the room they were in, hoping that it would reveal a fire escape beyond one of them. The little beam flattened out against the glass, unable to penetrate its thick coating of grime.

"There must be a fire escape!" Ken thought. He swung his flashlight in an arc to pull Sandy toward the windows with him.

The first sash they tried slid up with a grating sound, but it was too late to worry about noise.

Ken's heart gave a leap when he saw the rusty shape of the fire escape beyond it. They still had a chance!

In a split second they had both wriggled through the open window onto the grating. Ten feet below them, illuminated by the light from the rear windows of the Tobacco Mart, was a small paved back yard.

Sandy swung one leg over the railing, his big hands firmly gripping the rickety metal framework. Behind them they could hear footsteps pounding up the stairs.

Just as Sandy prepared to swing his other leg over, the back door of the shop below them flew open and Cal stepped out into the courtyard. A pistol glinted in his hand.

Sandy's leg lifted over the railing and in the same motion he dropped. His feet struck Cal's shoulders. The impact swung the man halfway around—and then he crumpled under the weight of Sandy's body.

Ken landed beside him, miraculously on his feet.

"Through the store!"

Sandy was up and had taken a step after him when Cal's flailing hand caught his ankle. Cal's other hand, still clutching the gun, came up from the pavement in a great arc.

The redhead's fist shot downward toward Cal's stubbled chin. The hand on Sandy's ankle loosened its grip. The gun clattered to the concrete just as Cal's head thumped heavily against the same hard surface.

Sandy spun around and ran after Ken.

One after the other they hurdled a large carton that stood in their way, swerved around a pile of shipping containers, tore through the door into the outer shop, and lunged toward the front exit. Ken's fingers reached for the knob.

But before he could touch it the door opened inward, knocking him back on his heels. Sandy cannoned into him from behind.

Grace's square middle-aged figure was outlined in the doorway. The gun in his hand was steady. He brought it forward until it nudged against Ken's chest.

"Back up," Grace said quietly. "It's more private in the rear of the store." Without turning his head he addressed Barrack, who had come up behind him. "Tell Andy to stay on guard outside. Then come back here. We have to decide what to do with these two snoopers."

CHAPTER XIII

A DESPERATE PLAN

"WHERE'S CAL?" Grace said sharply.

They were all in the back room, within the circle of light that illuminated the table on which fresh green bills were still scattered. Barrack and Grace, both with guns, kept the boys between them.

"Cal!" Grace called.

"Coming!" The man spoke in a mumble, and when he appeared at the rear door a moment later he was shaking his head dazedly. But his head jerked up and his big hand balled into a fist when he saw the boys. He came toward them in a rush.

"Shut that door!" Grace's voice stopped him.

Cal sketched a jab with his fist. "Just let me—!"

"I said shut that door."

"O.K." Cal turned and slammed the back door shut with a crash.

"Sit down—you two," Grace ordered the boys. "And put your hands flat on the table."

"Look here!" Sandy managed to get a note of angry innocence into his voice. "I don't know what you—"

"Quiet." Barrack added weight to the command with a prod of his gun.

Cal laughed unexpectedly. "They're sure not going to be taking any stories to the police now." He grinned even as he massaged the reddening bruise on his chin.

"What makes you think the police don't already know what we know?" Ken asked. His voice had sounded uneven for the first few words, but he had managed to steady it before the end of the sentence. "And the Treasury men too?" he added for good measure. "We're with Global News, you know, and the way we work—"

"I told you to keep quiet." Grace sounded more impatient than alarmed.

"Look, Grace," Cal said suddenly, "why don't we—?"

Grace turned on him angrily. "Whatever we're going to do," he said, "we're not going to discuss it now." He jerked his head toward the boys. "Keep them covered, Barrack."

He disappeared into the front part of the shop for a moment and returned with a roll of wrapping twine.

"Here, Cal," he said, tossing it to him. "Tie their hands."

Helpless between the two pointing guns, Ken and Sandy had to submit. Cal took a vicious pleasure in his task. He jerked their hands roughly behind them, and when he bound the rough twine around their wrists he pulled it so hard that it cut into the flesh.

"Just tie them," Grace said. "Don't try to amputate their hands."

"They're all right," Cal assured him. "But they'll stay tied, believe me."

"We'll put them in the cellar for the time being," Grace ordered. "They won't be able to overhear us from down there. And they won't," he added with a faint smile, "be overheard themselves if they decided to do a little yelling. The buildings on both sides of us are empty until eight o'clock in the morning—and there's a heavy stone wall on the street side."

He opened a door in the side wall as he spoke, and gestured to Barrack to lead the way down a flight of stairs visible below. Barrack lighted the way with a flashlight.

Ken and Sandy were prodded after him down the rough uneven stairs into a damp, dank-smelling basement. Old boxes littered the floor and cobwebs hung from the beams like tattered gray curtains. For a moment, in one corner, a pair of small bright eyes caught the light from Barrack's flash, and then there was a scampering sound as the rat burrowed into the safety of a pile of rubbish.

At Grace's order Barrack swung open a heavy door.

"In there," Grace told the boys.

Cal's heavy hands thrust at their shoulder blades and they half fell into an empty coalbin.

The door swung shut behind them. They could hear it being jammed into place as one of the men drove a piece of timber against it from the outside.

Then the footsteps of the departing men resounded on the stairs.

Almost immediately a faint scurrying began somewhere near by in the heavy darkness.

"More rats," Sandy said between clenched teeth.

Ken controlled his own instinctive shivering at the

thought. He knew that rats and snakes were the two things Sandy hated most. "Just keep shuffling your feet," he said, "and they won't come near us." He shuffled his own feet noisily on the gritty floor.

"If I could just—!" Sandy broke off with a gasp and Ken realized that he was straining at his bonds.

"You'll never break that twine," Ken told him. "Don't wear yourself out trying."

Sandy let his breath out in a gust. "Guess you're right." He moved a few steps. "But I can try the door. Maybe—" He threw his weight against it, using his shoulder as a battering ram.

The wood didn't even budge. Sandy tried a second time, and a third, with no better results. Then he gave up.

"Doesn't make any sense, anyway," he muttered. "Even if we got out of this hole—" He stamped his feet up and down several times, and somewhere a startled rat squealed sharply. "I wish I'd taken the time to hit dear old Cal a second time. If there'd been just two of them to handle— It would have been even smarter if I hadn't tried to adjust my camera in the light of your flash."

"How could we have guessed," Ken demanded, "that one of those old men in the library reading room was a lookout? Anyway," he added, "we'd have been all right if I hadn't stopped on the way out to grab a couple of those bills off the table. If I'd reached the door half a second earlier I'd have had it open before Grace got there and we could have been out on the street."

"I didn't know you had some of the bills." There was a desperate note in Sandy's sudden laugh. "Well, they

say money talks. Maybe it'll tell us how to get out of here."

"Grace and his friends are going to get us out of here themselves before tomorrow morning," Ken said firmly. "You could tell that from the way they talked. They're not going to risk keeping us here when the buildings on either side are opened up."

"Maybe they're not going to keep us anywhere—alive," Sandy said. "Grace didn't fall for your hint that the police know as much about them as we do. Probably he thinks he could just quietly put us out of the way, without anybody ever guessing what had happened to us."

"If he was going to do that, I think he'd have done it immediately," Ken said. He hoped he sounded more convinced of that than he actually felt. "This is his base of operations. I don't think he'll risk doing *anything* here that might attract attention to it."

"Half an hour ago we were on the point of attracting attention to the place ourselves," Sandy said bitterly. "But now that he's got us under his thumb he doesn't have to worry any more. He's safe."

He lashed out suddenly with his foot. There was a piercing squeal and then the thud of a soft body against the wall. "That's one rat that won't walk across my foot again," Sandy muttered. "I agree with you," he went on an instant later, "that they'll probably move us out of here. But the only place I want to go right now is to the police—and somehow I don't think that's where they'll take us."

"Use your head, will you?" Ken forced himself to speak sharply. "If they're going to take us some place

else, that will be our chance. Start thinking about that, instead of—"

"Chance to make a break, you mean?" There was a new, faintly hopeful note in Sandy's voice.

"To make a break—or maybe to send a message. Wait! I think I've got an idea!" Ken was no longer trying to steady Sandy. He was caught up in the excitement of the thought that had just struck him. "Those phony bills I picked up—there are about five of them, I think—are inside my windbreaker. Can you back up to me and open the zipper?"

"I think so," Sandy said. "Why?" But he was feeling his way toward Ken in the dark.

"These are apparently good counterfeits," Ken said, turning so that Sandy's fumbling hands would find his zipper tab. "They'd probably fool most people—except bank clerks."

"So? I don't get it. Hold still."

"I'll hunch down to make it easier." Ken scuffed his feet noisily for a moment and then bent his knees until the top of his windbreaker was even with Sandy's hands.

"There it is." Sandy had found the tab. "But my fingers are so numb I can't pull it down."

"Just hold it," Ken directed. "I'll stand up." He straightened slowly, and the slide fastener slid down as he came erect. "Good. Now try to get hold of the bills inside."

"Wait until I see if I can get the circulation going again." Sandy began to beat his hands against the wall. "Go on with what you were saying," he muttered.

"If we can tear these bills in half and scatter them

along the way to—wherever they take us—we'll be leaving a trail for the police to follow," Ken said.

Sandy grunted. "But suppose the police don't find them? Suppose somebody else does? The proportion of police to ordinary citizens in this town—"

"But it won't matter who finds them," Ken broke in. "Look: what good is half a ten-dollar bill?"

"No good," Sandy said shortly. "Especially to us."

"But suppose you found half a bill. What would you do?" Ken persisted.

"Take it to a bank," Sandy said. "That would be the only place that would— Bank!" he repeated suddenly. "What a dope I am! The bank would spot it as a phony. The person who brought it in would be questioned."

"Right," Ken said excitedly. He had had to make Sandy figure it out for himself, to prove that his idea was sound—that others might reach the same conclusion he had himself. "And when they trace the location of the various halves that are picked up, they'll have a rough chart of where we've gone. Provided," he added, less hopefully, "that we're not taken out into the country somewhere. We couldn't count on the bills being picked up anywhere except along a city street."

But Sandy's spirits were now high enough for them both. "They won't waste the time to take us very far," he insisted. "And when a gang of Treasury men are turned loose on the hunt, *they* won't waste any time. Come on. Let's get those bills torn in two while we've got the chance. Which side are they on?"

Ken turned. "I'm right in back of you. They're on my right—tucked into my belt."

"Got them!" Sandy fumbled a minute, remembering

to shuffle his feet as he did so. "Those rats are getting braver every minute," he muttered. Then he sighed. "I can't tear them by myself."

"It needs both of us. Wait—let me help."

It was heartbreaking work. Standing back to back, their hands almost numb, they kept laboriously at it. Ken held a bill and Sandy tore the stiff paper a fraction of an inch at a time. Fear that they might drop a piece on the floor, and expose their possession of the bills, made them doubly careful.

But finally the job was done. Ken had five halves stuffed into a back pocket, and so did Sandy. Even with their hands bound they could pull them out and drop them somewhere—if they ever got the chance.

"If we were only untied," Ken muttered, "I could write a couple of words on each one. Dad's name, maybe, and the word Global. That ought to be a help if—"

He stopped. There were footsteps coming down the stairs. Even through the heavy door they could hear Cal's whining voice.

"I can't help it if it is too early for you," he was saying. "I have to get the truck back by eleven. That's when he starts working."

"If you're worried that somebody will notice their tied hands," Barrack said, "let's untie them temporarily. I'll keep a gun on them, in case they try to make a break. And it'll just be across the sidewalk."

"All right," Grace said grudgingly. "That's the way we'll have to do it."

Ken held his lips against Sandy's ear, while the men outside were tugging the bracing timber away from the door.

"Help cover for me if we get a chance, and I'll try to scribble something on the bills," he whispered.

"Right."

A few moments later, in the beam of a flashlight and under three watchful pairs of eyes and three guns, the boys were rubbing at their loosened hands, trying to revive feeling in the numbed fingers.

"Never mind the calisthenics," Grace ordered. "Get going. Barrack, you go ahead of them."

Upstairs, in the kitchen, Grace spoke again briefly.

"I'm afraid we're going to have to inconvenience you for a while," he said with a pretense at politeness. "It's your own fault for sticking your noses into something that's not your business. But the inconvenience will be temporary if you behave yourselves."

"But make one move," Barrack added, gesturing with his gun, "and you'll be worse than inconvenienced."

"Follow him," Grace then ordered the boys, indicating Barrack.

When the boys emerged onto the sidewalk they looked quickly around. The nearest human being in sight was a man nearly a hundred feet down the street, with his back turned toward them. They didn't need the reminder of the guns prodding into their backs to know how futile it would be to attempt to run for it.

"Get in here." Barrack lifted the tarpaulin at the back of a small delivery truck and pointed inside.

The interior of the little truck was dark and smelled overpoweringly of fish. Ken and Sandy sat side by side on a couple of empty fish crates, with Ken close against the driver's closed cab. The canvas walls of the truck fluttered against their backs. Barrack crawled in after

them. The flashlight in his hand held them in a steady beam. He dropped the tarpaulin.

"O.K., Cal," he said.

The tarpaulin was tied in place, the truck engine started, and the vehicle moved off.

Sandy leaned forward, an inch at a time, until he half shielded Ken from Barrack's view. Ken found a stub of pencil in his pocket. He drew out one of the half bills, with infinite care, and without daring to look down at it scrawled two words that he hoped would be legible.

Sandy was supplying additional cover by making conversation. "You'll be picked up by tomorrow morning—at the latest," he said cheerfully to Barrack.

"Let me worry about that."

"O.K. It's your neck."

Ken forced his fingers between the canvas wall and the side of the truck, the bit of paper held between them. Then he let go and drew his hand back again.

A gust of air had struck his neck as he thrust at the canvas. Sandy tensed. He had felt it too. Ken hoped that Barrack's coat collar was high enough so that he hadn't noticed. He reached for another torn bill. Sandy kept talking.

One by one Ken scribbled on the bits of paper and pushed them down the crack alongside the tarpaulin. Each time he did so the wind blew in, sharp and cold, and he held his breath. But Barrack apparently didn't feel the draught.

When Ken finished the halves in his own pocket he reached for those in Sandy's, thankful that they happened to be on the side next to himself.

"What's the penalty for counterfeiting these days?" Sandy asked Barrack. The cheerfulness in his voice indicated to Ken that he had felt Ken's hand—that he knew the sixth bit of paper was on its way outside.

Barrack didn't answer.

"Six?" Sandy pressed. "Years, I mean," he added quickly.

Ken shoved one more paper outside. "Seven maybe."

Sandy seemed to be considering, until another cold draft struck their necks. "Or eight," he said.

Barrack was still silent.

The truck swerved sharply and stopped a moment later. "We can settle on ten, I guess," Ken said. "That'll hold him for a while."

Sandy risked a quick pat on his arm in congratulation.

The rear tarpaulin was lifted.

"Get out," Cal said.

Barrack backed out first, his gun always ready, and stood guard while the boys lowered themselves to the ground. The moment they left the protection of the truck a bitter wind hit them. They were back on the pier again. Ken and Sandy were prodded up the ladder which led to the deck of the barge they had hurriedly left not long ago.

But this time the little cabin of the barge, when they were thrust into it, lacked the cozy air they had envied earlier. Nothing had been changed. Cal's coffeepot still stood on the stove. But now, somehow, the cramped little room seemed to smell of danger.

Cal retied their hands again immediately, and as tightly as he had the first time. Then he bound their

feet together, crossing their ankles first so that bone pressed against bone and the boys were as helpless as trussed chickens. And finally, with cruel pleasure, he added a large patch of adhesive plaster over their mouths.

Then Sandy was thrown into the lower bunk, and Barrack and Cal picked Ken up and tossed him into the upper one.

"You know what to do?" Grace asked Cal.

"I know, all right." Cal began to turn down the lamp. "And they'll be perfectly safe here until I take the truck back."

Three pairs of footsteps moved toward the door. It was opened and shut, and the boys could hear it being locked from the outside.

Silence settled down heavily in the little room. Outside a tugboat hooted sorrowfully. The stove clinked once. Otherwise only the ticking of a clock marked the stillness.

Ken grunted as loudly as he could past the plaster over his mouth. Sandy grunted in answer.

Ken grunted again—an uneven series of sounds. A moment later Sandy did the same. Interpreted into the dots and dashes of the Morse code, the noises meant "O.K." Sandy was letting him know that he too realized they could communicate.

"B-I-L-L-S G-O-N-E," Ken spelled out laboriously. He felt certain Sandy was already aware of that, but to tell him so gave Ken the comfort of contact.

"G-O-O-D," Sandy grunted back.

They had done what they could. Before noon, Ken hoped, there should be a small stream of people hope-

fully applying to one bank or another, asking if the torn bills they had found might be replaced by whole ones. And soon afterward—if all went well—a small army of police and Treasury agents would be combing the lower east side area of New York.

Ken wondered if he should have written "Tobacco Mart" on some of the bills. It might have directed police attention to the spot. But, on the other hand, it might instead have sent the finders of the bills to Grace's headquarters, and that would have defeated Ken's purpose.

The minutes dragged by in the dark.

Suppose, Ken found himself thinking, that none of the bills were picked up? Or that none of the finders were hopeful enough of being able to cash in on them to take them to a bank?

If he and Sandy weren't rescued by morning, would they ever be rescued?

But we will be, Ken told himself. Everything will work out the way it should. The police would notify Richard Holt when they found his name scribbled on the bills, and Ken's father would drive the investigation forward at top speed.

"By noon—by afternoon at the latest," Ken kept repeating to himself, "we'll be free. And Grace and his gang will be behind bars."

He wished he could signal his hope and confidence to Sandy, but the effort seemed more than he could manage. He ached in every muscle. His hands and feet were beginning to pain agonizingly from the tight bonds.

The minutes lengthened into hours. Ken had no idea what time it was when Cal returned, looked at them

briefly, and went out again to pace back and forth on the aft deck.

Suddenly there were sounds of men calling back and forth. The barge lurched once, and seemed to shift. It bumped into something with a solid thud.

Ken tried to heave himself into a sitting position, but it was impossible. He began to grunt frantically.

"M-O-V-I-N-G," he spelled out.

Sandy answered with one word. "Y-E-S."

There was no need to try to say more. Both of them realized that when—or if—the police came to the dock the next morning in search of them the barge and its captives would no longer be there.

CHAPTER XIV

HEADING FOR DEEP WATERS

ON THE FAR SIDE of the cabin wall something—a frying pan, perhaps—began to bang rhythmically as it swung back and forth. The barge was responding sluggishly to the river swells, its tremendous weight of stone lending it a stability that resisted the rise and fall of the water.

Ken's panic gave him strength. He heaved desperately upward, trying to achieve a sitting position. His head struck the low ceiling with a resounding crack. He fell back, half stunned.

Labored dots and dashes, in the form of grunts, came quickly up from below him. "Y-O-U O-K?"

Ken managed to answer. "O-K."

Finally he forced himself to try again. He had been almost upright once. If he didn't heave quite so far—

He was sitting up finally and hunching himself forward until his head was even with a window set in the wall midway along the bunk. The gap between the curtains was wide enough to let him peer out.

There were lights in the distance. But close to the

barge everything was in darkness. He could see nothing.

The cabin door began to open and Ken let himself fall back on the bunk.

Cal came in, lighted the kerosene lamp, and then came over to the bunks.

With a single jerk he ripped the adhesive from Ken's mouth, and then bent to do the same for Sandy.

"That's so you can say your prayers," he told them with a laugh. "Yell 'em out loud if you want to. Nobody's going to hear you now." He seemed enormously amused at the idea.

Ken worked his jaws a moment. He felt as if Cal had ripped off several layers of skin along with the tape.

Cal was pouring himself a cup of coffee from his apparently bottomless pot.

"Where are we going?" Ken asked evenly.

"Where are *you* going?" Cal threw back his head to laugh again. "Well, now, there's lots of answers to that question." He took a long swallow of coffee. "Sailors sometimes call it Davy Jones's locker. Other folks have different names for it. But whatever you call it, it's mighty wet and a long way down."

Then, still laughing, he finished the coffee and went back outside, slamming the door heavily behind himself.

"He's lying," Sandy said quickly, from the lower bunk.

"Sure," Ken agreed. "Remember when Dad was talking about counterfeiters that day at the office? He said they usually printed a lot of bills at one time, before they distributed any of it. Then, when they had all they

were going to make, they distributed it all over the country at one clip—and by that time their printing equipment and everything else was dismantled and scattered. So even if the bills were identified, there was nothing that would tie the counterfeiters up to them."

"Sure. I remember," Sandy said.

"So all they're probably going to do with us is get us safely out of the way some place, until they're finished with their production and ready to clear out."

"That's right."

But Ken himself hadn't been convinced by what he said. And he knew that Sandy didn't believe it either.

Cal had been telling the truth. They both knew that.

The wind sighed gustily along the cabin walls, but otherwise the little room was silent for a long moment.

"Where do you suppose these barges go?" Ken asked finally.

"Who knows?" Sandy, too, managed to conceal the panic in his voice. "Up the East River to Long Island Sound—across the bay to Staten Island—"

Ken's heart jumped. Maybe Cal was lying after all. "Not out to sea?" he asked. To drown them in the open sea might be comparatively safe. But if the barges stayed as close inshore as Sandy had suggested, drowning would be too risky. A body would wash ashore. Investigation would follow immediately.

"They *can* go out to sea," Sandy admitted slowly. "They go down the coast to Baltimore sometimes—and up to Boston too, I guess."

"Oh," Ken said.

With an effort he forced his brain to work. "You've

sailed out of New York Harbor," he said. "How long would it take us to be towed out to deep water—in case we are leaving the harbor and heading for the ocean."

"Depends on which way the tide's running," Sandy said, "and what kind of a tug they've got on the job. From what we saw on the pier earlier, I'd say all three of the barges are being towed at once—anyway, they all had the same cargo. That's quite a load. Ought to take four or five hours, I'd guess."

"What are our chances of signaling one of the other barges from here?" Ken asked.

"Small," Sandy answered briefly. "It would have been possible shortly after we left the pier," he went on, "but the towlines are lengthened pretty quickly, especially in dirty weather. We may already be a couple of hundred feet from the barge, and falling behind fast. And there's nothing back of us," he reminded Ken. "This was the last barge tied up at the pier—counting from the seaward end of the line."

"I know." Suddenly Ken heaved himself up again to a sitting position. All his aches and his weariness were temporarily forgotten in the desperate need for action. "So in that case," he said, "we'd better see if we can't get out of this cabin while there's still a chance of yelling for help. If the next barge is only two hundred yards away—"

But Sandy had interrupted him. "Just how had you figured on doing that?" he demanded.

"I hadn't—yet," Ken admitted. "But together we ought to be able to think of something. We've got two brains between us—and I doubt if Cal has more than half a one himself."

"My brain's not working tonight," Sandy mumbled.

Ken heard the dead note of despair in his voice. "Look," he said hastily, "how much of the time will we be alone in here? What are Cal's duties on this tub?"

Sandy's answer was reluctant, as if he really were incapable of thought—or believed it to be entirely futile. "They don't amount to much," he said finally. "He makes sure the lines are secure. Makes sure the running lights are in working order. Checks the bilges and starts the pump if the water in the hold gets too deep. Generally I guess he just sits in here by the fire."

At that moment, as if to prove Sandy's words, Cal came in again. He looked over at them briefly, his thick lip curved in its usual sneer. Then he shook the stove into life, refilled his enamel mug with coffee once more, and settled down in the comfortable chair he had occupied earlier that evening. Deliberately he opened up his newspaper.

Ken clenched his teeth. They couldn't even discuss the possibilities of escape with Cal sitting there on guard.

In a sudden frenzy he strained at the bonds around his wrists. But even if his hands hadn't been already numb, he knew instantly he couldn't break the cord if he struggled over it for a year. The rope around his crossed ankles was equally strong and equally secure.

He could feel the bunk under him jerk as Sandy shifted his weight, and knew that Sandy too had been making the same useless attempt.

The coal in the stove crackled softly. Outside, the spray beat against the walls. Time dragged by endlessly.

Suddenly Ken's body jarred against the wall of the bunk. He came to, blinking, and realized that despite the tautness of his nerves he had been exhausted enough to sleep. As he twisted himself away from the wall his eyes fell on a clock he hadn't noticed before, high on the opposite wall. It said five o'clock.

Ken instantly was wide awake. Five o'clock! Then they had been underway for a long time.

He felt the motion of the barge beneath him. It was no longer a steady forward drive. It was an up-and-down heave. And spray was now lashing frequently against door and windows.

Ken knew the barge had left the shelter of the shore. It was nearing the open sea.

His eyes flew to Cal. The man was still seated at the table. He had finished his newspaper and was reading a magazine, his lips forming the words as his eyes followed the lines.

"Sandy," Ken said softly. "You awake?"

Cal's eyes flicked toward the bunks and then away.

"I'm awake." Sandy's voice was dull. He sounded beaten. He, too, realized their predicament—and he, too, was helpless to fight it.

Suddenly Ken was swept by an anger that overcame his fear and despair. He lunged toward the edge of the bunk.

"I didn't want to give away too much back there in the shop last night," he said loudly, hurling his voice against Cal's bent head, "but I wasn't kidding when I said the police know about what's going on there."

He hoped the lying words would be truth within a matter of hours—that soon, following the trail of torn

bills, the police would be on the hunt for the counterfeiters. It seemed impossible that they could locate the barge in time to do the boys any good. But, Ken thought, if he could disturb Cal's sneering calm—even for a moment—it would be worth it.

"They've probably got Grace and Barrack right now," he went on. "And if you think those two are going to take the rap when they can pin it all on you—"

"Shut up!" Cal said, without looking up. "You're wasting your time. And you're talking through your hat."

"You think the police don't know about the forced entry into my father's apartment?" Ken went on.

It was a shot in the dark, but surprisingly it paid off.

"That wasn't me," Cal growled, "and nobody can prove it was!" He glared at Ken.

The small triumph was like a jolt of adrenalin pouring through Ken's veins.

"They know about the illegal entry into the Allen house in Brentwood, too," he said tauntingly, testing his luck a little farther.

"That wasn't me either! They—"

Ken couldn't hear the rest of it. His ears were suddenly filled with a thudding roar.

It wasn't spray that had hit the wall of the cabin that time. It was solid water—tons and heavy tons of it.

Cal staggered to his feet, grabbed a suit of oilskins and a pair of rubber boots out of a cupboard, flung them on, and dashed out of the cabin.

"Good," Sandy said. "He's going to be busy for a while. Now we can get busy ourselves. I've been thinking."

"Yes?" Ken wished he could see Sandy's face.

But before Sandy could answer, Cal came into the room again. A sheet of spray came with him, to hiss and steam where it struck the hot stove.

Cal shoved the door shut and leaned against it for a moment, panting, before he crossed the room to take a kerosene lantern from a shelf. When he had lighted it he left again immediately, fighting his way outside against wind-blown spray that seemed bent on flooding the cabin.

Sandy picked up where he had left off. "That door opens inward against the foot of the bunks. If I could turn around on this bunk so that I was behind the door when Cal opens it, and if I could kick it back against him when he was already in the room, he ought to be pretty well knocked out by the blow."

"Knocked outside the cabin, you mean?" Ken was trying to visualize what Sandy described. It sounded like a dubious possibility.

"He might be," Sandy agreed. "That would be all right too, if it just put him out of commission for a while. But what I hope is that if we time it right we can drive him against the opposite wall. Then I think we ought to be able to get rid of these lassos we're wearing. All we need is plenty of time and some kind of tools."

Ken was still mulling over the scheme Sandy had outlined. "He'd have to come all the way to the edge of the door—that far into the room—and then stop there a minute." His voice raised a notch. "And he'd do just that if I were lying right there on the floor in front of him."

"You?" Sandy's question reminded Ken of his position on the upper bunk, up under the roof. "How would you get down there without breaking your neck?"

The barge lurched sickeningly. The entire cabin shook as a heavy wave struck the rear bulwark. The coffeepot fell from the stove with a loud clatter and rolled across the floor.

"On the other hand," Sandy said quietly, when the blow subsided for a moment, "there are worse things than risking your neck." He paused for a moment. "You hear something?" he asked.

Ken listened. "Yes! An engine! Could it be the engine of—?"

"It's the pumping engine," Sandy said grimly. "He's started it up. We must be shipping water."

"Oh." Ken's momentary hope that it might be the engine of a rescue craft died hard. But he tried to fight off his disappointment. "Good," he said. "It'll keep him busy awhile. Give us time to get ready."

"Maybe," Sandy said. "Or maybe it means we have less time than we thought. If it's really as tough out there as it sounds, the tugboat captain may decide to turn back."

"I see," Ken said. His throat felt suddenly tight and he swallowed. "And if he decides to turn around, Cal would have to give up the idea of waiting for really deep water. He'd do—what he's supposed to do to us—right away."

CHAPTER XV

CATAPULT

"BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN we can't try your scheme, Sandy," Ken said after a moment. "It just means we have to speed up the schedule."

"That's what it means," Sandy said. He laughed grimly. "I've got no feeling in my legs. My arms are numb to the elbow. I've got about as much chance of standing up as I have of—" He broke off, and Ken could hear him edging over on the bunk. "But I might as well try," he concluded.

Ken moved until he could see over the rim of his own bunk. "Why stand up? All you have to do is turn around on the bunk."

"I've got to get you down," Sandy muttered. "If you try it by yourself you'll probably break your neck in the drop."

Sandy had flung his legs sideways and was lowering his bound feet to the floor. Because his ankles were crossed he could put only one foot flat on the floor at a time. He leaned forward, pushing himself with the

hands tied behind his back. He waited until the barge was momentarily on an even keel and then forced one foot to take his weight.

The leg was numb. It collapsed immediately. Sandy barely managed to fling himself back into the bunk, to save himself from toppling forward onto his face.

Ken could feel sweat tickling his own forehead.

Outside, the pumping engine coughed. It spit, missed fire, caught again, and then died.

"Hear that?" Ken's voice was as cheerful as he could make it. "Cal's having a little trouble."

Sandy was on the edge of the bunk, ready to try again. But he held himself still to listen. "He'd better get that engine going before too long," he muttered. He pushed his foot against the floor and once more the leg crumpled.

"Try beating your foot on the floor," Ken said.

Sandy raised his legs and lowered them, thumping first one foot and then the other against the floor.

"What's all the hurry—about the engine, I mean?" Ken asked, in an effort to distract Sandy's attention from the knifelike pains that he knew must be shooting through the redhead's feet and legs. "Barges don't really need to be pumped out, do they? You couldn't sink them if you tried, could you?"

"Sure they sink," Sandy grunted, "if they get enough water aboard." He gave one last thump and then again tried his weight on his foot.

His knees buckled, but with a desperate effort he straightened up and wedged his broad shoulders against the upper bunk. He braced himself there for a moment, his face contorted with pain.

The barge tilted, lifting its forward end as if the entire Atlantic were piling up under it, thrusting it skyward. Sandy's shoulders began to slide along the bunk, his poorly balanced body tilting sideways.

Ken twisted swiftly and thrust his legs out over the edge of the bunk, holding them stiff with all his strength. Sandy slid against them. For a moment Ken thought the redhead's weight would push them aside, and that Sandy would fall past them to the floor. But just as Ken realized that he could no longer bear the strain, the barge reached the peak of its upward lift and began to tilt the other way. Sandy's body slowly righted itself.

"Now," Sandy said, "I'm—"

The pumping engine coughed and started. The boys froze. If it began to work smoothly again, Cal would certainly not remain outside in the driving wind and weather.

Just then the engine sputtered several times and died again.

"Quick!" Sandy said. "Maybe the next time he'll make it. Force your knees apart and bring your legs down over my head. I'll set you down pickaback."

"You can't!" Ken told him.

"Come on. Stop arguing." Sandy barked the words.

There were times, Ken knew, when Sandy's stubbornness was like a rock. This was apparently one of those times.

He lifted his legs above Sandy's head, forcing them apart at the knees until they formed the facing halves of a diamond. The movement was agony.

Sandy ducked his head and brought it up between Ken's legs, so that Ken's crossed ankles thrust themselves out before his chin.

Again the engine coughed into life, sputtered, and died. A wave struck the barge's aft bulwark, and shattered into spray which rattled against the cabin like a hail of machine-gun bullets.

"Throw yourself forward," Sandy ordered, "and hope for the best. If I go down try to protect your head."

Ken took a deep breath. Suddenly his perch, five feet above the floor, seemed atop a skyscraper.

"Get ready," he muttered. "Here goes."

He leaned back and then lunged forward, his weight shoving Sandy clear of the bunk. The redhead's foot slid on the tilting floor, his legs buckling. His shoulders jerked to the right. He was fighting with everything he had to keep himself steady.

"Hang on!" he gasped.

A single grunt of pain escaped him as he dropped forward onto his knees, striking the floor with a bone-jarring crash.

For a moment he knelt almost upright, balanced by a fortunate roll of the barge. Then he slumped sideways, no longer able to bear Ken's weight on his shoulders.

They sprawled in a tangle, Ken's legs still fastened around Sandy's neck, their chests heaving, their bodies aching.

Outside, the engine started again. The throb of its exhaust, muffled by the sound of wind and water, seemed steady.

Sandy groaned. "He'll be coming back in! Get going! Get off my neck!"

Ken tugged and Sandy squirmed and wriggled. Finally Ken was free. With a burst of frenzied strength he managed to roll over on his stomach and shove himself upward to his knees. Then he began to inch his way over the floor to the place in front of the door—the spot where they wanted Cal to stop.

Sandy had also gotten to his knees in front of the bunk. He waited, panting, until the barge heaved in the right direction, and then threw himself over the edge of the lower bunk, squirming and fighting until he was on it again.

When they were both in place, Ken said, "I'll have to tell you exactly when to kick the door shut. You won't be able to see him, once it's open. When I yell, you let drive."

Sandy didn't answer for a minute. When he did, his voice was low and jerky. "It's no use, Ken. I wouldn't be able to kick a ping-pong ball now."

"Cut that out!" Ken said sharply. "You'll do it all right. When you've had a minute's rest. Listen! The engine's stopped again! Now he's got to work on it some more. Just relax until he comes in. Take deep breaths."

A wash of solid water struck the side of the cabin, and water began to ooze in under the door, forming a slowly widening puddle. The kerosene lamp in its wall bracket flickered as a gust of cold wet wind rattled the windows and penetrated inside.

Sandy was lying perfectly still on his back, his legs hanging over the side of the bunk. Ken watched him

tensely. Finally Sandy gave a long, shuddering sigh. Then he lifted his head slightly to take a sight on the door, shifted his body a few inches, and slowly brought his knees up toward his chest. If he thrust them out they would strike the outer edge of the door as it was flung open.

Ken's own sigh of relief came all the way from his numb and nerveless toes. Sandy was going to be all right.

"This look O.K. to you?" Sandy muttered.

"Just right," Ken told him. "Perfect."

"But I won't be able to hold this position for very long. And if I let my legs down—"

"No! Don't do that!" Ken said urgently. "We won't get any warning. He'll just burst in when he comes."

The engine started up once more.

"See?" Ken said. "It's going again. Any second now—"

He broke off and listened intently. There was a lull in the storm, and in the unexpected quiet they could hear the pumping engine ticking smoothly away. They could even hear the gurgle of water spouting out of its pipe.

A long minute passed, and then another. Ken watched Sandy, and his heart thudded in sympathy. Sometimes Sandy's legs would sink forward and down, and Ken would catch his breath. But Sandy always pulled them back again, the muscles of his neck drawn tight with the effort.

"He'll be here any second," Ken repeated. "The pump sounds steady as a watch now."

With a rush the wind came back again, throwing a ton of water against the side wall.

"He won't stay out in this if he doesn't have to," Ken said.

Sandy's feet suddenly crashed to the floor.

"Sandy!" Ken's voice snapped like a whip. "Get them up! He might—"

They both heard Cal's heavy body lunge against the wall near the door, thrust off balance by the wind.

"He's coming! Sandy!"

Sandy's feet came up from the floor slowly, inch by inch, and his knees bent back toward his chest.

And then the door started to open, and a heavy rubber boot stepped over the threshold.

Ken's view of Sandy was immediately cut off. He had no idea whether Sandy would be able to get into position in time or not—or whether he had the strength left to get into position again at all.

Cal's whole body was in the room now, his right hand pushing the door wide ahead of him. Water streamed down his face. He brushed it out of his eyes with the left hand and caught sight of Ken, near his feet. Instinctively he leaned forward over Ken's prone body.

"Now!" Ken shouted.

The heavy door traveled only six inches before it struck its crouching target. But those six inches were enough. Somewhere Sandy had found the strength to put his whole weight behind the push.

Cal's body zoomed sideways. The force of the drive had knocked him off his feet like a bowling ball hitting a tenpin. His arms flailed as he fought for balance. His mouth opened on a shout.

But the shout was never uttered. Cal flew across the cabin, missing the stove by inches. His head crashed against the far wall with a thud that jarred loose a frying pan hanging above the stove. The clang of metal on metal was still echoing in the little room when Cal's whole big body collapsed in an inert heap.

The door banged shut.

CHAPTER XVI

WITH THE HELP OF FIRE

"You did it!" Ken's exultant shout broke the spell of silence that had fallen on the cabin.

"It looks like it." Sandy laughed shakily. "Now all we have to do is get these ropes off before he comes to again."

"If we could find a knife I could back up to you and hack through the ones on your wrists," Ken said, his eyes traveling rapidly over the room. "There must be one here somewhere. He has meals on board."

But there was no knife visible. There was no drawer in the table where one might be found. Their survey of the room revealed that the only place in the cabin which might conceal a knife was the row of cupboards high on the rear wall.

"I think I could pull the doors of those things open with my teeth, if I were standing up," Sandy decided. "Anyway, it's worth a try. Can you see to it that Cal goes on slumbering comfortably while I'm at it?"

Ken thought a moment. Bound as he was, it was un-

likely that he could knock Cal out again if the man began to revive.

"I don't know," he muttered. "Even if I sat on him, he's big enough to throw me off. I've got it! I know how to take care of him. You go ahead, Sandy—if you've got the strength to move."

Sandy was still breathing heavily. "I'm O.K.," he said. "I seem to have got my second wind." He began once more to work himself off the bunk.

Ken wriggled over to the armless wooden chair beside the kitchen table and began to shove it laboriously along the floor toward Cal. The man lay on his back, his head a few feet from the wall against which he had been knocked out. His sou'wester had fallen off, and an egg-shaped bump was beginning to swell up almost in the center of his crown.

Ken managed to get the chair between Cal's body and the wall, and then shoved it forward until its legs straddled the man's head.

"Now if I can just climb up on the chair," Ken explained to Sandy, "with my feet on his chest, I'll be able to give him a solid thump on the chin with my heels if he begins to stir. And if he tries to sit up suddenly he ought to knock himself out again by hitting the bottom of the chair seat."

Sandy, who had managed to maneuver himself to a spot just beneath the high cupboards, sent Ken a congratulatory grin. "Brain conquers brawn again," he said. "Good work. Do you need a boost up onto the chair?"

"I'll make it—somehow," Ken told him.

He struggled to his knees alongside the chair, main-

taining a precarious balance by swinging his bound hands behind his back. Then he tried to jerk himself back and up, onto his bound feet. But his numb ankles gave way and he pitched forward on his knees again with an agonizing thump.

In almost the same moment Sandy, who was also trying to hoist himself into an erect position in front of the cupboards, toppled forward in a similar defeat.

After an instant's silence each of them asked the same question. "You O.K.?"

"Sure," Sandy said, past clenched teeth.

"Sure," Ken echoed.

Ken edged himself into position once more, his chest almost touching the side of the chair. He took a deep breath.

"Wait for the roll," Sandy said. "It's coming."

The barge dipped. Ken used all his energy in an attempt to straighten his knees. He got halfway up. For a second he seemed suspended in mid-air. Then his knees began to buckle. With a last desperate effort he twisted around. When he fell he hit the very edge of the chair and hung there, his body in a long slant that touched the chair seat midway between his hips and his knees. Almost immediately he began to slide downward as the barge reversed its tilt.

Ken threw his head far back. His bound hands scrabbled for a hold on the slippery wood. With all his might he pushed his heels against the floor, trying to hold his position against the pull of the deck beneath him.

He was fighting a losing battle when the barge reached the depth of its dive and began to climb.

Slowly, a fraction of an inch at a time, he moved backward onto the seat of the chair.

"You're almost on!" Across the room Sandy had abandoned his own efforts for a moment in his anxiety over Ken. "Push!"

Ken gave one final shove and then let his breath out with a gasp. He had made it! He slumped against the chair back, his chest rising and falling with the gulps of air he was sucking into his lungs.

After a moment he swung his feet up off the floor and onto Cal's chest. They landed some six inches from Cal's chin.

"O.K.," Ken said. "He's under control. One little backward jerk and I can subdue any ambitions he might develop. The only trouble is I can't see his face. So give me a signal if you see him beginning to open his eyes."

"It will be a pleasure," Sandy assured him.

Then the redhead returned to his own problem. The cupboard knobs were more than five feet above the floor. There was no way to reach them without standing up.

Sandy made one more gigantic effort to thrust himself upright from his knees.

For an instant he seemed to have succeeded. And then the barge gave an unexpected sideways lurch and Sandy fell heavily on his side.

He lay there perfectly still, his eyes shut in a face that looked startlingly white in the flickering light of the lamp.

"Sandy!" Ken jerked forward involuntarily but caught himself just before he lost his hard-won position

on the chair. "Sandy!" he repeated urgently. "Are you—?"

Sandy opened one eye. "I'm—all right," he gasped.

He raised his head slightly and his mouth tightened with pain.

"But I think I must have twisted my ankle a little when I fell," he went on after a moment. "I don't think I can put my weight on it for a while, even if I could get upright."

"Don't try it," Ken said quickly. "You're going to be no help if you're knocked out." His eyes searched the room frantically. "There must be *something* around here we can use to get out of these ropes." His voice lifted suddenly. "Maybe Cal's got a knife in his pocket!"

He leaned forward instinctively toward the body beneath him.

"Don't get off the chair!" Sandy said quickly. "I'll come over."

Again hope seemed to have given him new strength. Slowly at first, and then a little faster, he squirmed his way over the floor. Sitting down near Cal, with his back toward the unconscious man, his bound hands began to fumble with the fastenings of Cal's oilskins.

Five minutes went by, and then ten more, before Sandy had explored every pocket in the man's clothes.

"Nothing," he said. "I guess we're—" A slight movement caught his glance.

Cal's eyelid was fluttering. His head turned.

"Ken!" Sandy said quickly. "He's coming to!"

Ken jerked his heels backward. They smacked against Cal's chin.

Sandy bent forward for a careful look. "All right," he said. "You've taken care of him."

Neither of them spoke for a moment.

"We've done the hardest part," Ken finally burst out. "We've got Cal out of the way. Don't tell me we're stuck now!"

Sandy didn't answer.

"Do you suppose I could chew through those ropes on your wrists?" Ken asked.

Sandy grinned faintly. "In about three days, maybe —if they were well boiled first, to tenderize them."

"But there must be—" Ken broke off. "Listen!"

"Listen to what?"

"The pump's not running!"

Sandy concentrated, his head nodding slowly. The reassuring chug of the gasoline engine was no longer audible.

"How long ago do you think it happened?" Sandy asked quickly.

"I don't know. I just noticed it."

Sandy's eyes sought the clock.

"Almost eight," he muttered. A glance at the window told him that the hour was correct. The grayness outside would have been daylight if the weather were less stormy. "We're probably pretty well out to sea," Sandy said. "So the weather will be getting worse, if anything. A while ago we were afraid they'd turn back. Now . . ." His voice sank to a whisper.

"We're not licked yet," Ken said stubbornly. "We can't be—not as long as this thing is still afloat and we're still conscious."

The barge shuddered as another solid wave poured

over the bulwark and struck the cabin. The water seeping in under the door was coming faster now.

"As long as this thing is still afloat," Sandy repeated, and shrugged. "That might not be long at this rate."

"But if we're really in trouble," Ken said, "the barge up ahead will be able to tell—now that it's getting light."

"They may be able to tell," Sandy agreed, "though I doubt if they can even see us in this weather. But there's not much they can do about it except cut our towline if it looks as if this tub were really going down."

"Would they do that?" Ken sounded incredulous.

"What else could they do?" Sandy asked. "You couldn't expect them to hold on and be carried down with us."

Ken swallowed. "We could always go overboard—with something to hang on to. Any piece of wood—"

"Sure," Sandy said. "And how long do you think we'd last in this kind of a sea—even with something to keep us afloat—when we're trussed up like this?"

"You mean," Ken said slowly, "that unless we get that pump going there's really a chance that—?"

Sandy didn't wait for him to finish. "That's just what I mean. The more water she ships," he explained carefully, in a colorless voice, "the deeper she rides. And the deeper she rides, the more water she takes. It's what's known as a vicious circle."

Crash! That time the water dove full over the cabin roof, pouring down the walls in solid sheets.

How many like that, Ken wondered, would it take to fill the barge to its gunwales and drag it under? How soon—?

But all thought blanked out of his mind as the barge careened far to one side. Ken fought to retain his place, digging his heels into Cal's rocklike chest.

Sandy, with nothing to brace himself against, slid helplessly across the floor toward the hotly glowing stove.

"Sandy!" Ken shouted. "Watch out!"

But Sandy couldn't check his headlong dive. His shoulder struck hot metal.

Even as he hit it he was twisting away, with all the strength of his muscles. But the smell of burned cloth quickly filled the air. And as Sandy managed to lunge himself toward the wall, and safety, Ken could see the charred black burn on the sleeve of his windbreaker.

"Did it go through?" Ken asked. "Are you burned?"

To his amazement Sandy's answering voice was suddenly strong—almost cheerful.

"I just got warmed up," he said. He twisted around so that Ken could see his face. "We'll beat this thing yet, Ken."

Ken stared at him. The thought popped into his head that Sandy's mind might be wandering. A moment ago he had sounded completely beaten. Now— Sandy was edging back toward the stove.

"What are you doing?" Ken demanded. "Sandy, stop!"

"Let me alone. I'm burning to get out of these things." He lay down on his back in front of the stove and started to lift his legs into the air. "I'm not going to risk working on the ropes around my wrists," he said. "Too tricky. I couldn't see what I was doing and I might put my hands out of commission. And I'll need

'em when we get out there to work that pump. But the ones around my ankles—"

Ken's heart had stopped pounding in panic. In a sudden flash he had realized what Sandy was planning to do. He was going to burn through the ropes that bound his feet together.

"Can I help?" Ken leaned forward. "Maybe if I—"

"No," Sandy grunted. "You stay where you are. But keep an eye on me. I can't see very well from down here." His feet were above the top of the stove now, and Sandy was lowering them carefully so that the ropes were directly above the metal edge. "How'm I doing?"

"Looks good from here. But be careful!"

New life sounded in both their voices now.

There was a low sizzling sound. The ropes had become damp from the water on the floor. Then again a scorching smell filled the cabin.

"Ouch!" Sandy yanked his legs away. "Too close that time."

Once more he got into position. Once more the scorching smell rose from the vicinity of the stove.

"One strand gone," Sandy muttered a few minutes later. He winced and jerked his feet upward but immediately lowered them again.

Ken winced in sympathy.

"There goes another one!" Sandy announced.

And suddenly his feet were free. The cord that had bound them lay in smoking tendrils on the floor.

CHAPTER XVII

ROBBED BY THE WAVES

SANDY lay sprawled on one side. His forehead was damp with sweat, but he was already rubbing one ankle gently against the other in an effort to restore circulation.

"Feels as if someone were poking hot needles in my feet," he said. "But don't get me wrong," he added. "I'm not complaining."

"Are you burned much?" Ken asked.

"Not enough to worry about," Sandy assured him.

"Well, here goes," he said a moment later. He drew his right knee up beneath him and, using that knee and his right shoulder and elbow as points of leverage, he shoved himself up to his knees, keeping them wide apart so that he could balance against the roll of the barge. Then he dragged his left foot forward and put it flat on the floor, so that he was resting on one knee and one foot.

He tried pushing against that foot, to bring himself erect, but the ankle gave way as soon as he put any weight on it.

"Ouch!" he muttered, and rested a minute, wriggling his foot to bring the painful muscles back to life.

He tried it twice more. And then suddenly he was on his feet. He had to lean against the table in order to stay upright, but the grime-streaked face beneath the red hair looked grimly jubilant.

"Look at me," he said. "I'm standing! Never thought it would feel like such an achievement."

Ken grinned. "No hands, too. Now let's see if you can walk over to that cupboard and find a knife."

Unsteadily, and wincing at every step from the pains shooting up his legs, Sandy made it to the cupboard wall. He waited there a moment, until the barge was on a comparatively even keel, and then he clamped his teeth on the knob of the first door and jerked his head back. The door flew open, almost knocking him backward, and a shower of objects came tumbling out, bouncing from Sandy's chest to the floor.

Sandy looked down at them. "Nothing but food," he muttered disgustedly. "Flour, peanut butter, noodles . . ."

"When we've got more time," Ken said, "I'll remember to laugh at the sight of you complaining at the appearance of food. But right now I'm more interested in the next cupboard. Try again."

Sandy braced himself as the barge twisted in a corkscrew dive. Then he closed his teeth around the knob of the next cupboard and pulled that one open. A row of cups hanging on hooks swayed violently with the movement of the barge, and small piles of plates and saucers would have flown into the room except for the guard rails that held them in place. Sandy's glance fell

on a flat traylike box on the upper shelf, above the level of his eye.

Ken saw it too. "That's it!" he said excitedly. "It's just like the box Mom keeps knives and forks in—in a drawer in the kitchen table. Can you get it down?"

"I'm certainly not going to leave it there," Sandy told him.

There was one other chair in the cabin, besides the one that Ken was using. Sandy hooked a foot over one rung and dragged it along the floor, hopping painfully on the other foot. When the chair was beneath the cupboard he crawled up onto it, straightened up, and gave a shout of triumph.

"Plenty of knives!"

But the cupboard shelf was too shallow for him to poke his head in and pick one knife up with his teeth. After pondering for a moment Sandy finally clamped his teeth over the edge of the box, turned around, jumped down from the chair and made it to the table just as the box tilted forward. There was a rattle of cutlery on the floor, but there were still several pieces of battered kitchenware inside when the box thudded to the table.

Sandy grinned, massaging his aching jaw muscles against one shoulder. "I feel like a retriever," he said, bending over to study the contents of his prize.

"Good doggie," Ken applauded. "What luck?"

"One knife coming up," Sandy assured him. He turned his back to the box and felt among the contents with his bound hands until he located the object he had noted there.

As soon as Ken could see what Sandy was holding

he said, "Great! A paring knife. Now let's hope it's sharp. Stick the handle between my teeth and hold your hands in front of me."

The barge dipped sickeningly and Sandy braced himself against the table to avoid being thrown. Ken leaned back hard against his chair. There was a heavy thud as a wall of water swept over the stern and struck the rear wall of the cabin. The pool in the middle of the room was widening fast.

"Come on," Ken said. "Hurry up." He dreaded thinking how long it was going to take him to free Sandy's hands. The pump had already been out of operation for some time. How much water had the barge taken on already? How much more could it stand?

He closed his mind to the questions as the barge settled, and twisted sideways on the chair so that Sandy could get close to him.

Sandy got into position, back toward Ken, who reached forward and took the handle of the knife between his teeth, blade downward.

"A little closer. Up a couple of inches," Ken mumbled between clenched jaws. "Good. Hold it."

He moved his head rhythmically back and forth, drawing the blade of the knife across the tough cord. Sandy held himself rigid, his legs spread for balance against the roll of the deck. The muscles in his arms and shoulders bulged with the effort of holding his hands in place.

Finally one strand parted. But Cal had done his job well. Each loop was independently tied. Ken kept on. His eyes ached under the strain of trying to focus on the rope a scant few inches from his nose.

Another loop parted. And then a third. And then a fourth.

The knife clattered to the floor. Ken sank back, exhausted.

"There's one more to go," Ken gasped.

"Wait a minute." Sandy took a deep breath, bent his head, and hunched his shoulder muscles. He gave one powerful tug. The last rope snapped. His hands were free.

He stood motionless for a moment, panting. Then he began to knead his fingers to get the numbness out of them. As soon as he could pick up the knife—and without bothering to massage the painful welts on his wrists —he went to work on Ken.

A few quick strokes were enough to free Ken's hands. And then his feet were free too.

"I'll be tying Cal up while you get enough life back into your feet to be able to stand on them," Sandy said quickly. "Rub your hands too. We've got work to do."

Sandy turned Cal over on his face on the wet floor, ripped off the man's belt and used it to tie his hands behind him, as the boys had been tied.

"Here," Ken said. He had to use both his hands—his fingers were still nerveless—to take a limp dish towel from a nail on the wall and bring it to Sandy. "This will do for his feet."

Sandy pulled off Cal's heavy boots and bound his feet together, ripping the towel into strips first to give him the length he needed.

"Your hands O.K.?" he asked when he had finished.

"As good as yours, I guess. Do you know how to start a pump?"

"First give me a hand with Cal," Sandy said. "We'll put him up on the bunk before he drowns down here."

"I doubt if he'd do the same for us," Ken muttered. But he helped hoist Cal's heavy body up to the lower bunk Sandy had recently occupied.

"Put on his oilskins," Ken said then. "There ought to be another suit around here too."

He found another rubber coat, sou'wester, and boots in one of the still-unopened cupboards while Sandy was getting into Cal's storm clothes.

Sandy listened intently for a moment before they opened the door. "Wind's coming from our rear," he said. "We'll be in the thick of it out there on the aft deck. So watch out for a big wave—and hang on to something if you see one coming. Ready?"

"Ready."

They stepped quickly out onto the heaving aft deck and slammed the door shut behind them.

Outside, they found themselves in an angry world. All around them rose huge combers that seemed to be racing toward the barge or away from it with express-train speed. The foam-flecked water reflected the dirty gray of the sky. There was no land in sight, and no other craft. There was nothing but water—steep vicious mountains of it that seemed at every moment in danger of tumbling down upon the wallowing barge.

"Hang on! Here comes one!" The wind ripped Sandy's shout out of his mouth. He linked one arm through Ken's as he spoke and threw the other arm around a massive iron bitt bolted to the deck.

A ponderous wall of water was coming toward them from the port quarter. The barge fought to rise with it,

her timbers groaning at every joint. But the creaking craft, laden with stone and water, was too heavy to climb to the top.

The wave struck the stern, and the upper several feet of it sluiced straight over the bulwark. It poured over the boys, knocking their feet out from under them.

For long seconds they were submerged. Ken clung to Sandy and the redhead clung to the bit. Finally the bulk of the deluge poured through the scuppers. Their heads came above water, and then the rest of their bodies. They lay gasping for breath.

Sandy struggled up first. "All right?" he asked, hauling Ken to his feet.

"I think so." Ken had lost his sou'wester. Water streamed down his face from his soaked hair.

"Watch out for the next one," Sandy warned, "while I take a look at this engine."

The pumping machinery was housed in a small flat-topped shed about the size of a large dog kennel. Sandy dropped to his knees in front of it and unhooked the side panel that opened downward on hinges. Ken stood alongside, his eyes scanning the heaving waters that surrounded them.

"Looks dry!" Sandy yelled triumphantly. "I'll try her."

He wrapped the starting rope around the pulley of the two-cylinder air-cooled engine and gave it a jerk. The engine turned over, but it didn't start.

Ken leaned down and put his mouth to Sandy's ear. "How about gasoline? Got enough?"

Sandy unscrewed the cap of the tank. He poked his

hand down as far as he could and shook his head. He had felt nothing but emptiness. Then he looked around the inner wall of the engine house, spotted a measuring stick, and thrust that down into the tank until it touched the bottom.

When he brought it up Ken could see that only the bottom quarter-inch of the stick had touched liquid.

He lifted his eyes from the stick barely in time to shout "Here it comes!" Another massive wall of water was about to crash down upon them.

It was an even bigger wave than the one before. A crushing weight of sea swept over the engine house, to shatter into stinging spray against the rear bulkhead of the cabin. For what seemed endless minutes there was three feet of water piled on the deck, and when it finally drained toward the sides it pulled the boys along with brutal force. They were barely able to prevent themselves from being sucked overboard.

They pulled themselves wearily to their feet again when the worst was over. The water was cold and the air was colder still. Their lips were blue. Their teeth chattered.

Sandy rubbed his hands and blew on the fingers to warm them up.

Ken was looking at the engine house. The side panel had been down when the wave struck.

"Soaked!" Ken shouted, pointing to the engine.

Sandy nodded grim agreement. "Have to dry it. Get blanket—towel—anything." He jerked his head toward the cabin.

Ken nodded. He took a quick look at the sea around them and then made a dive for the cabin door. He was

out again in a moment with a heavy bath towel he had found under the bunk.

Sandy was no longer bent over the engine house. He was trying to open the hasp of a small lean-to built against the cabin wall.

"Gasoline!" he shouted. "I hope."

Ken nodded and set to work. Within a few minutes he had dried the plugs and the wires of the engine.

Sandy was still struggling with the rusted fastener. When he looked over and saw Ken point to the engine, with a gesture that said "It's ready," Sandy stepped back and drove his foot at the door of the lean-to. It cracked down the middle. Sandy struck it again and the hasp flew off. The door sagged open on twisted hinges. Sandy dropped to his knees and peered inside.

When he straightened up again he held a five-gallon can in his hand.

"Sandy!" Ken had time to shout only the single word, and to clamp his fingers around the engine-house doorway. He hadn't noticed the huge wave approaching until it broke over the bulwark and poured across the deck in a smothering flood.

Ken saw Sandy go down and his big body swept along in the grip of the water. Ken reached for him blindly, his eyes pinned shut by the piercing spray. He felt his fingers clutch a flailing oilskin-clothed arm, and he hung on with all his strength.

The water poured over them for what seemed an endless length of time. Sandy's weight dragged painfully, threatening to pull Ken's arm from its socket.

And then again the water receded and they were left on the sloshing deck.

When Ken was able to move he found he had to force his fingers open to free his grip on Sandy's arm.

"That was close," he gasped.

Sandy choked and coughed. "Too close."

Then Ken noticed that Sandy's hands were empty. The gasoline can he had been carrying was no longer in sight.

"The gas—overboard!" Ken said.

Sandy shook his head, struggling to get to his feet. "Don't worry. Two more cans in there."

"In where?"

Sandy's eyes followed Ken's and the color drained out of his wet cold-reddened face.

The lean-to had disappeared. Only a few shattered boards marked the spot where it had stood before the wave struck.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE IRON BOX AGAIN

SANDY looked at Ken, and then back at the spot where the lean-to had stood. He seemed completely stunned by the catastrophe which had overtaken them.

Ken's bloodless lips shaped the words. "That was our last chance."

"We're not licked yet," Sandy shouted. "Come on around the other side. I noticed something there—covered by canvas. Maybe it's a hand pump."

This time Ken couldn't respond to the determined hope in Sandy's voice. But he obediently followed the redhead around the cabin into the windy fury of the cabin's other side. There Sandy went down on his knees beside a canvas-wrapped mound nestling against the bulkhead.

His fingers tore at the lashings without effect. The ropes were frozen fast.

Ken roused himself out of his despair and exhaustion.

"Knife," he said briefly, and fought his way around the corner to the cabin door. When he came out he had the paring knife in his hand.

Sandy took it from him and hacked at the icebound ropes until he could rip the canvas off.

"It *is* a hand pump!" The wind threw his shout back into his teeth.

Sandy braced himself against the storm's strength, grabbed the pump handle, and began to move it back and forth.

It seemed a small weapon with which to fight the vast quantities of water that must already have accumulated in the barge, but Ken knew it was all they had. He took up a position opposite Sandy and bent his own back to the task.

Suddenly a stream of dirty water began jetting from the outlet hole to splash on the deck.

"She's coming!" Sandy yelled. "Faster!"

Back and forth, back and forth, they worked the handle as rapidly as they could. When a big wave raced over the aft bulwark and threatened to drown them, they still hung onto the pump handle, and were working it again the moment the receding water let them breathe.

Back and forth . . . back and forth . . . Under their heavy oilskins their frozen bodies began to warm up.

Ten minutes went by, and then ten more. They were becoming uncomfortably hot. Sweat mingled with the salt spray on their faces. Their aching muscles cried for rest. But they kept on. Back and forth . . . back and forth . . .

Suddenly Ken knew that the agony of his parched throat was one thing he could no longer bear.

"Water," he said. "I need water."

Sandy answered without losing his rhythm. "Go ahead. I'll get some later."

The cabin was warm and peaceful and quiet. Ken had to avoid passing near a chair, for fear he would slump down on it and never rise again. He forced himself to hurry, gulping his drink and turning back toward the door the moment he had slaked his burning thirst.

Back at the pump once more, he caught the rhythm quickly. And it wasn't so bad now, he thought. He must be getting numb.

Back and forth . . . back and forth . . . Sandy seemed tireless. He even shook his head when Ken motioned toward the cabin, indicating that he could keep the pump going alone if Sandy wanted to go inside for a moment.

Back and forth . . . back and forth . . .

Ken fastened his eyes on the stream of water that was pouring from the outlet. It seemed extremely small compared to the enormous amount of water that must be in the bilge.

"How fast?" he asked Sandy, jerking his head toward the outlet.

Sandy understood his query. "Two quarts a stroke."

For a moment Ken thought he must be fooling. Only two quarts a stroke! He had already figured that they were pumping at about the rate of one stroke a second. Now he tried to compute the results of their labors. Two quarts a second—thirty gallons a minute.

It wasn't enough! It couldn't be! Every time a wave washed over the bulwarks it probably dumped several hundred gallons of water into the hold—more than they could pump out in ten long minutes of back-

breaking work. And the waves came far oftener than once in every ten minutes. It was a losing battle.

"What's the use?" Ken shouted at Sandy, looking down at their steadily moving hands.

Again Sandy understood. "We're buying time. Can't keep her afloat forever, but maybe something will happen. Ship might sight us. Or the storm might die down."

His body sagged slightly. The effort of speech, against the wind and on top of his weariness, had been too much.

Ken tried to smile, and could feel the caking of salt on his cheeks crack when his muscles moved.

"Sure," he shouted. "Something's bound to happen. Go inside and rest a minute."

Sandy looked questioningly at the pump.

"I'll keep her going," Ken assured him.

Sandy nodded. Then his figure disappeared around the corner of the cabin.

Ken made himself keep an even pace. His impulse was to drive his muscles with every bit of strength he could muster—to quicken the rate of the strokes. But he knew he couldn't maintain a faster speed for more than a moment, and that the effort would leave him completely exhausted.

Back and forth . . . back and forth . . . The rhythm never broke except when a big wave came over the bulwarks and Ken had to put all his energies into hanging onto the handle to prevent himself from being swept off his feet.

Back and forth . . . back and forth . . .

Suddenly he was aware that Sandy had been gone a long time.

Ken felt panic seize him by the throat. If Sandy was lying unconscious in the cabin, too weak to get up—if he had been washed overboard—!

Ken let go the pump handle and turned toward the rear of the cabin.

"Sandy! Sandy!" he called desperately into the wind.

And in that moment Sandy appeared at the corner of the cabin. With him was Cal, looking pale and obviously terror-stricken.

Sandy's haggard face wore a grim smile. "New recruit!" he shouted. He shoved Cal forward, ordered him with a gesture to seize the pump handle.

Then Sandy leaned close to Ken's ear. "Go inside for a rest. We'll take turns working with him."

Ken was still staring, stupefied. "But—"

"Don't worry," Sandy told him. "He knows we'll go down if he doesn't lend a hand. He's scared stiff."

He looked at Cal, who seemed to be gazing at the pump as if he'd never seen it before.

"Work!" Sandy yelled. "You—"

None of them had noticed the big wave coming.

Ken grabbed for the pump and ducked as the sweeping torrent landed.

But the water shot Cal's feet out from under him and threw his big helpless body toward the bulwark. Sandy grabbed him just before he went over. When the wave subsided he shoved Cal erect again.

"Now pump!" he yelled. "And hang on the next time a wave comes over!" Then he seized the handle himself and nodded to Ken to take a breather inside.

Ken moved toward the cabin door, still feeling dazed.

Inside, out of the wind and the cold, he dropped onto

the lower bunk for a few minutes until his thudding heart slowed to normal again.

He had been startled when he saw Cal come out on deck with Sandy, but now—as he thought it over—he realized that Cal's strength could be an asset instead of something to dread. Now that he and Sandy both were free of their bonds they could take care of Cal if it became necessary. In the meantime, Cal could give valuable service at the pump, spelling the boys one at a time. Sandy had pointed out that they were buying time. Cal could help them to buy a little more of it.

Ken looked at his watch. It was only half past nine! He felt as if days had gone by since Sandy and he first staggered out onto the deck to try to re-start the pumping engine.

Suddenly he realized that the fire in the stove had died down—that the cabin was not as warm as it had been. He was beginning to shiver as his sweat- and sea-drenched clothes congealed. He struggled up from the bunk, shook the fire, and poured on more coal.

Coffee, he thought—that's what we need. He found the coffeepot in a corner under the cupboards, filled it, and set it on the stove.

Then he dived back toward the corner again. He had belatedly become aware of an object that he had seen there—a two-burner gasoline stove, apparently for use in the summer when the coal stove would not be kept going.

Ken picked the small compact mechanism up and shook it. Its tank gurgled. There was gasoline inside! Not much—but perhaps a gallon. Hugging the stove to his chest he made his way outside to the pump.

"Gas!" he shouted to Sandy.

Sandy needed no further explanation. His cracked lips split wide in a grin.

"Keep pumping!" he ordered Cal. And then, taking the stove from Ken, he led the way to the engine house.

Carefully, as if they were pouring molten gold, they emptied the liquid from the stove's gas tank into the tank of the engine. Then Sandy wrapped the starting rope around the pulley.

"Here goes!" The engine spun under Sandy's pull, but it didn't quite catch. Sandy wrapped the rope around the pulley again. He hunched his shoulders forward and threw his full weight against the line.

The engine coughed—sputtered—spit. It died momentarily, and then it started again. The gears began to move the rocker arm that worked the twin pistons. Water spurted out of the pump's big outlet pipe!

"She's going!"

Sandy closed the flap of the engine house. He got it shut just before another wave struck them. They came up gasping when it had subsided. The engine hadn't faltered.

Ken shouted against Sandy's ear. "How long will she run on a gallon?"

Sandy shrugged. "Maybe an hour. Better keep the hand pump going too."

Ken nodded. Somehow he felt the worst was over. They were going to survive after all, now that the big pump was in operation. And suddenly a lot of questions —questions he'd had no time to consider in his fear for their lives—began to push their way forward from the back of his mind.

"Will Cal keep pumping if we leave him a minute longer?" he asked.

Sandy looked puzzled but he nodded. "I think so. He's afraid we're going down."

"Then come inside a minute." He took Sandy's arm and pulled him toward the cabin.

"What's the idea?" Sandy asked, when they had closed the door. "We can't let him go it alone too long. He'll tire and slow down."

"This barge is a part of the counterfeiting organization," Ken said. "What do they use it for?" He jerked open the two cupboards they had not yet explored.

"Are you crazy?" Sandy demanded. "With luck we may keep this thing afloat for a couple of hours—or less —if we pump our fool heads off. Why'd you bring me inside here to listen to riddles?"

Ken was tossing clothes and various oddments out into the middle of the floor. He answered without ceasing his search. "Barges are handy for getting rid of bodies. We know that's why we were brought aboard. They're good for any illegal job that has to be done privately. Why wouldn't they be a good place for printing counterfeit money?"

"Here?" Sandy's jaw dropped. "Where are you expecting to find the printing press? In the coffeepot?"

Ken, peering under the bunks, muttered, "Nothing but a couple of life belts." He turned and began to scan the rough surface of the floor.

"Look," Sandy began impatiently, "if you can't—"

He broke off as Ken shoved his nose close to the floor, studying one particular plank. Without looking up he reached onto the table for a fork from the cutlery box.

He jammed its tines into the crack alongside the plank and pressed down on the handle. The plank lifted.

Ken pulled it upward and it rose easily—a length of ten-inch-wide board. He whistled softly.

Sandy dropped onto his knees beside him. Together they peered into the cavity that had been exposed.

"Printing ink," Ken said, lifting out one of the several bottles visible. "Green." He checked another. "And black."

Sandy had his hand beneath the floor too, his anger with Ken lost in curiosity. "A portable printing press!" he breathed. "Dismantled—but you can see that's what it is!" He looked over at Ken, his eyes round. "I humbly apologize for—"

Ken had lifted something else out of the cache.

Sandy gasped.

"Mom's jewel box!"

"A duplicate of Mom's box," Ken corrected.

With shaking hands he lifted the lid. The box was empty. But the lead lining in the bottom lay on a slant —out of its proper place. Ken inserted the fork under one corner and pulled.

The lining lifted, revealing a half-inch of space beneath it. Ken took out the object that had been concealed in that shallow secret compartment. It was flat, almost the same size as the box, and wrapped in flannel. He unwound the cloth.

Neither of them said anything for a long moment. They were looking at the three steel engravings required to print a ten-dollar bill.

CHAPTER XIX

OUT OF THE SKY

SANDY reached out to touch them as if he didn't trust the evidence of his eyes. "The one for the back. And the two for the face—one for green ink, one for black." He shook his head amazedly. "And they were in that box!" He felt the lead lining. "It's as thin as paper," he said. "They must have made it that way to compensate for the weight of the plates—to make both boxes weigh about the same." He looked up at Ken. "But they didn't quite do it—they were a few ounces out."

"Dad brought the plates past customs not knowing what he was doing." Ken spoke slowly, piecing together fragments of information. "They never thought we'd find out—they never thought anybody would find out." He was rewrapping the plates and putting them back into the box.

Sandy got to his feet quickly. "And maybe nobody ever will, if we don't get ourselves out of this mess."

Ken lifted up the mattress on the lower bunk and shoved the box under it out of sight. "We'll need that

evidence," he said, "and we don't want Cal to throw it overboard or something."

Sandy dropped the plank back in place. "Let's go," he said. "We'll have to spell him for a while."

The bargeman was still working away at the pump, but his strokes were slower now and he was panting with near exhaustion. He made way for the boys and leaned up against the cabin, clutching at it to maintain his balance as the barge heaved and swung.

"Stay there," Sandy ordered, "where we can keep an eye on you."

Once again the seconds began to keep pace with the pump handle and the stream of water spurted out of the outlet pipe. Back on the deck the gasoline engine throbbed reassuringly, its pump cascading a flood of water over the side.

Ten minutes passed by—then ten more. Ken was breathing heavily, his arms like lead once more.

"Drop out," Sandy ordered. "Let him take over."

"What about you?" Ken shifted to a position against the wall and let the bargeman take hold of the pump handle.

"You spell me in ten minutes." Sandy's jaw was clenched grimly as he moved his powerful arms back and forth.

The engine coughed and died.

"Needs gas!" Cal let go of the pump handle.

"Keep pumping," Sandy said. "There is no more gas. Whatever pumping is going to be done on this barge—we're going to do it."

Cal looked at the water issuing from the outlet. "We'll never make it." His voice was thin with fear.

A wave washed over them and drowned out the rest of his words.

When they were free of water again Sandy went back to work. "Save your breath," he suggested.

Ten minutes later Ken replaced Sandy at the pump and the exhausted redhead got what rest he could by slumping against the cabin wall. Ten minutes after that he took Cal's place.

Round and round they went, fighting desperately against time, trying to match their puny strength against the ponderous walls of water that rolled down on them and swept over the bulwark.

By eleven o'clock it was plain that they had been losing ground rapidly. The barge was growing more sluggish with each passing wave. Her portside was noticeably down—it was becoming even more difficult to maintain a footing on the slippery, sharply sloping deck.

Ken hung on to the pump handle as water washed over the side. "How long?" he asked through clenched teeth.

Cal sputtered and coughed as the water receded. He pointed a shaking finger to the cargo. "She's shifting!" he gasped. "We'll turn over!" Panic drove him to the bulwark. He poised there ready to jump.

Sandy grabbed him and pulled him back. "Don't be a fool! You wouldn't last out there a minute." He held on to the man while he turned his head to shout to Ken. "Go on inside and bring out the life belts—and a length of line." He thrust Cal toward the pump handle. "Get moving. She's not going quite yet."

Ken was gone almost ten minutes. When he returned,

sliding along the tilted deck in a moment of comparative quiet between two waves, he carried two life belts and a coil of half-inch line. He had already fastened a life belt around himself.

He handed a life belt to Sandy and took over the pump while the redhead worked his way into the canvas jacket. "Had to pick up something," Ken said. He poked at his life belt. "Got it fastened under here."

Sandy took over Cal's place. "Get into the jacket," he ordered.

"Hang on!" Ken cried. "A big one coming!"

The barge took long, agonizing seconds to rise from under the weight of water. Over the noise of the wind they could hear the rattle of stones as still more of the cargo slipped toward the portside.

Sandy looked forward anxiously. He stopped pumping and swiftly tied the three of them together with the line, leaving twenty feet of slack between them.

"Look!" Ken cried. "Blue sky!"

High overhead a small patch had appeared in the heavy overcast. As they watched, the wind spread the clouds further and further apart and the patch of sky grew larger.

"One patch of blue sky doesn't mean the sea will calm down," Sandy said grimly. "It may take hours more for that to happen—days even."

As if to prove his words another comber swept over them an instant later, to bury itself in the gravel and add additional tons of water to the load the barge was already carrying.

More gravel cascaded down toward the bulwark. The portside seemed a scant three feet above water

while the starboard side reared menacingly in the air.

Sandy straightened up. "This isn't accomplishing much," he said. "There's no use kidding ourselves."

"Abandon ship?" Ken asked.

"We'll wait until the last possible moment," Sandy said. "We'll climb up on the stone—way over on the starboard side. When she goes down, she'll roll to port. That's when we'll jump to starboard. We have to clear the barge when we hit the water or . . ."

There was no need for him to finish the sentence. In silence, with Sandy in the lead, they climbed up onto the pile of stone and made their way to the top.

Overhead the sky was clearing rapidly. The sun had found a way through the last of the scudding gray clouds. Even the wind was easing slightly. But the waves were as high as they had ever been. From their new vantage point the mammoth walls of onrushing water seemed even larger.

Huddled on the rough stone, they watched the barge tilt more and more as the minutes passed. The cold got at them now that they were no longer straining at the pump handle. Their hands were numb, their lips blue. Only tightly clenched jaws could keep their teeth from chattering.

The boys sat close together; Cal a few feet distant. There was no conversation—there seemed to be nothing to say.

More stone slid down, carrying them toward the portside. They clawed their way back up. Cal got to his feet.

"Get down!" Sandy shouted. "Nobody jumps until I give the word. Then we all jump together."

"She's going over!" Cal swayed on unsteady feet.

Sandy hauled on the line until he had brought the terrified man down to his knees. "Don't—"

"Sandy!" Ken's voice rang out above the noise of the wind and the waves. "Do you hear it? A plane!"

"Where!" Sandy's voice cracked in the middle of the word and his head jerked upward.

Frantically they scanned the clear sky.

"There!" Ken shouted finally. Instinctively he began to wave his arms wildly in the air. "They'll see us, won't they? And send the Coast Guard?"

"We have to signal them—we need something big."

Forgetting the rope that tied them together, Sandy lunged down the pile of stone toward the cabin. Ken and Cal were pulled down with him as he hurled himself around the corner of the cabin.

Before they could get to their feet Sandy was back, carrying a blanket from one of the bunks. He scrambled up the pile of stone, hauling impatiently at the line and waving the blanket even before Ken and Cal could reach him.

"It looks like it's coming closer!" Ken shouted.

The air-borne craft in the sky was dropping rapidly now. Blinking their eyes against the glare of the sun, they could see that it was a helicopter—a bare thousand feet above the barge.

Approaching from windward, the helicopter continued to lose altitude as it swung in a circling maneuver until it was directly over the barge. Then it began to descend in a straight line like an elevator in an invisible shaft. When the machine was a scant thirty feet above their heads a door in the underbelly opened and

something fell seaward to land on the pile of stone a few feet from where they stood.

"It's a ladder!" Ken shouted. "A rope ladder! Come on!"

The ladder was swinging back and forth in the wind. Sandy made a grab for it and caught at the twisting rope. The helicopter continued to drop until it hovered only fifteen feet above them.

Ken looked upward. His father's face was peering down at him from the aircraft.

"Dad!" Ken began to laugh, almost hysterical with relief now that their long ordeal was over. "Don't bother to come aboard," he shouted. "We were just leaving, anyway."

Beside him, one arm thrust between the ladder rungs, the other around Ken's shoulders, Sandy was laughing too.

CHAPTER XX

FRONT-PAGE NEWS

SIX HOURS LATER, in Richard Holt's apartment, Ken and Sandy looked up at the sound of a key in the lock.

"It's Dad!" Ken said. "Now we'll get the rest of the story."

Sandy eyed the tall paper bag that Ken's father carried in each arm. "Now we'll get some food," he said.

Richard Holt smiled as he set the bags on a low table. "Help yourselves. There's a hot roasted chicken in there, from the rotisserie, and half the contents of Max's delicatessen. It occurred to me you might have an appetite by now."

"We've been drinking hot coffee ever since we got here," Ken told him, opening up one bag, "and we finally got warmed up. But coffee isn't very filling."

Sandy had already found the chicken, had dashed to the kitchen for a knife, and was hacking it up in sizable chunks.

The correspondent pulled a newspaper out of his overcoat pocket as he took the coat off. "Thought you might want this too."

"Hey, look!" Ken said, around a mouthful. "Photos by Allen—two of them! And on the front page."

With an unconvincing air of boredom Sandy bent over to see the pictures. One was a highly foreshortened view of Barrack, Grace, and Cal seated around the paper-littered table in the back room of the Tobacco Mart. The other was a dramatic shot—also made from above—of the stone-laden barge, her port gunwale already under water, slipping sideways beneath the waves.

"Not bad," Sandy muttered. "That camera sure is great. Sorry there wasn't better light for the table shot, though."

Ken grunted. "And I suppose you wish the helicopter had taken a nose dive into the sea, so you could have caught a better angle on the barge." He shook his head. "Nobody but you would even have thought of a camera two seconds after being rescued from a briny grave."

"Listen to who's talking!" Sandy said indignantly. "We weren't in that windmill a minute before Ken was telling you to radio to New York to have the T-men close in on the Tobacco Mart." He broke off, grinning. "Now there's a nice by-line. 'By Richard and Ken Holt.' "

"Oh. I hadn't even noticed it." Ken glanced rapidly at the story and then looked up at his father. "You shouldn't have let them put my name on it, Dad. You wrote it, and put in all that stuff about the foreign angle. I didn't contribute anything but a couple of guesses."

"*And* the trail that led the Treasury men to a mighty slick counterfeiting ring," his father pointed out. "Be-

sides, your guesses were all pretty accurate. You were right about everything. The plates were sold to Grace and his gang by a European outfit for whom things were getting a little too hot—the same outfit I was talking about that day in the *Advance* office. They were palmed off on me, in the iron box, so they'd be brought through customs by a trustworthy character."

Richard Holt grinned. "And then," he went on, "a carefully prepared duplicate was substituted for the box I'd brought. Grace has admitted he finally managed the exchange—after two false tries, here and in Brentwood—at Sam Morris's store. Despite the fact," he added, "that his little arson trick was almost a fiasco."

Ken's father watched the boys eating for a moment. "You were also right," he went on, "about the Tobacco Mart being the distribution center, under Grace's direction. Barrack supplied paper and ink, through his printing connections. And Cal was the printer, working on the barge, just as you suspected. In fact, it was a well-planned operation—until you two happened along."

Ken took one more glance at the by-line over the front-page story headlined: TREASURY AGENTS NAB COUNTERFEITERS. It gave him a good feeling to see his own name and the name of his famous father written together that way.

Then he looked up. "Well, there are still some things I'm guessing about," he said. "That Treasury man asked questions faster than anybody I ever met—but he wasn't very interested in answering any. I still don't know how the trail of bills actually put them on the track. It seemed such a long chance when we tried it."

"It was a long chance," his father agreed. "But it

worked. Two New York banks had people waiting on their doorsteps when they opened up this morning—people who had found half a ten-dollar bill and who wanted to know if they were entitled to exchange it for a good one. Half an hour later two more had turned up.

"The bills were immediately recognized as phonies—good as they were," he went on, "and Treasury agents were notified. They got in touch with me immediately, in Washington, when they found my name scribbled on the bills. Of course it was the one you left in the truck that actually gave us the tip on where to look for you."

"You left one in the truck?" Sandy sounded surprised. "I didn't know that."

"I didn't get a chance to tell you," Ken said. "I figured that Cal borrowed the truck from some innocent man—someone not in the gang. So I thought that if I left one bill in the truck the owner might possibly find it. It seemed the best chance we had to bring attention to Cal and the barge in the shortest possible time."

His father nodded. "The truck owner was the third man to turn up with half a bill. He'd found it when he started to load fish this morning. And when the Treasury people asked him where he'd found it and how it got there, he said it must have been left by the man who borrowed the truck last night. The T-men located the spot where Cal's barge was supposed to be tied up and learned that it had been towed out at four this morning, heading for Baltimore."

Sandy sighed comfortably and put down a bare chicken leg from which all the meat had been eaten.

"That's when we figured we were really lost—when the barge moved out."

"You shouldn't underestimate the Treasury Department—or the Coast Guard," Richard Holt said. "It was the Coast Guard that supplied the helicopter in record time, got us on our way, and radioed the tug to find your position." He reached over and absent-mindedly picked up a chicken wing and began to nibble at it.

"Speaking of underestimating," he went on, "it looks as though we underestimated you two. You told me in the helicopter that Lausch said Mom's box was both old and not very valuable. What prompted you to continue your prowling?"

Neither of them answered him immediately. Ken was suddenly very busy helping himself to potato salad from a paper container.

"He was worried about you," Sandy said finally. "Because of Barrack knowing your address here, when all we'd told his landlady was the unlisted phone number. And since your door had been found open—as if somebody might have broken in—"

"I see," Richard Holt said slowly. "I worry about *you* sometimes, when I'm half the world away. It never occurred to me that you're far more likely to get yourself into trouble when I'm at home."

"Oh, Dad!" Ken protested. "We don't make a habit of this—honest! No matter what Bert says, we don't go around looking for trouble. But I just had a hunch . . ."

He let his voice trail away when he saw the twinkle in Richard Holt's eye.

"Of course not," his father said. "You don't make a

habit of it. Things just happen to you." He leaned back in his chair. "Tell me, Sandy and Ken, do you suppose there's any way you could *prevent* things from happening?"

"You'll see," Sandy assured him. "We're planning to work out some kind of system for that—immediately. Aren't we, Ken?"

"Absolutely," Ken agreed.

"Good," Richard Holt said. "Very good indeed."

But he would have sounded less relieved if he had known of events that were taking place even as he spoke—events that would soon enmesh the boys in the hazardous adventure destined to become known as *The Clue of the Phantom Car.*